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### Hand Signs

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HAND SIGNS  
by  
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Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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in Creative Writing

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Hand Signs

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Abstract: *Hand Signs* is a novel-in-progress that follows a friendship between two high school women, set in the world of elite choirs. It is an investigation of giving up one's individuality for the sake of a greater harmony, in both the context of choral arts and young female friendships.

1.

Dr. Dave's hands were elegant, the ligaments strung like a cello — you can tell a conductor by his hands. He was a tall, ropey man. I was ten when I entered his private choir, having no formal musical training beforehand. From six years old, I'd been in a more casual children's singing group, which I'd recently outgrown. Practice for Dr. Dave's private classical choir was held twice weekly on the local liberal arts college's campus. The college had religious affiliations, and our rehearsals took place in a big church. One Sunday a month, we were expected to sing for the congregation in exchange for the use of their space.

The choir was separated into age groups. At the time that I was accepted, I qualified for both the young and intermediate groups, I was right at the period of transition. Given my height, I was stuck in the middle group. The middle group was composed of preteen girls, an age when all girls have issues of confidence — too much, too little. All of us were undergoing the mysterious process of female vocal change. No one had told us our voices would shift, like a boy's. Mine changed gears inelegantly right at my *passaggio*, the vocal break between lower and upper registers. I never knew what sound to expect from my own mouth. My natural solution to the unfamiliarity of my voice was to make it as quiet and thin, as inoffensive, as possible. This was a popular tactic in the intermediate group. The resulting sound of our choir was perfectly synchronized, eerily homogeneous; it wasn't displeasing, but instead, like a beautiful sound that had been subdued.

Practice began twenty minutes after school let out. We began by warming up, all age groups together. There were physical warm ups, vocal warm ups, percussive and rhythmic warm

ups, in addition to ear training, interval training, and solfege practice. We ran through them like army drills. After our warm ups, we rehearsed full-group numbers for an hour, trained in music theory for an additional hour, and split into our separate age groups for the remaining hour and a half of rehearsal. Dr. Dave was in charge of the full group rehearsals and also conducted the intermediate group. His wife directed the older group, a soft white-haired woman named Dr. Eliza. Dr. Eliza had a subtle German accent and conducted with the grace of a dancer. The youngest group was overseen by a protege of theirs, a thin and energetic man, with a sunken chest and long spindly arms and fingers, who moved with uncommon precision. He had recently finished his doctorate at the university.

My first day with Dr. Dave, there was one other new chorister. The group of us lined up in the first two pews of the chapel. He directed us in some vocalizations, though we'd been singing already for an hour and a half. This was so that we could tune into one another as a small group, and understand the way our voices behaved as one. He told us to listen to our neighbors. Then, he singled out the other new chorister and me, and sent us to the back of the chapel.

"Your diaphragm," he yelled to us, "is a balloon."

The rest of the choir stood at the front of the chapel, lined up before Dr. Dave, facing him. Behind Dr. Dave, the pipe organ was a long metal smile, the wood frame drawn up at the corners, to bare its wolflike teeth.

"Place your hand on your diaphragm," he said. We obliged. "No! Not there. Jennifer, show them where."

An older girl (too confident) trotted to the back of the chapel. She had thick, yellow hair and her glasses were heavy, she wore a band tee over a large hoodie. The girl took our hands,

physically, and moved them from our lower abdomen — I had copied the other new chorister — to the midsection. Then she trotted back to the front, and fit herself into the gap she'd left in the lineup.

“When you breathe in, the balloon expands,” Dr. Dave said. “Breathe in.”

We did. I watched the other girl, whose hand did not seem to move. Mine moved outward with my breath, and made me look fat.

“Your hand should move outward,” he said.

I was relieved. I shot a glare at the other girl, who was obviously suppressing the natural movement of her breath in order to appear skinnier than me. Then again, she was skinnier than me.

“Now, yell,” he said.

We looked at one another.

“First, you,” — he meant the other girl — “yell, ‘Hey, Dr. Dave.’”

She did. He looked satisfied.

“Now, you,” — meaning me.

“Hey, Dr. Dave,” I yelled, feeling, as he'd instructed me to, the inward compression of my diaphragm on the first syllable of each word.

“Louder,” he commanded.

Now, the girls at the front of the chapel had angled their bodies toward the church aisle, at the end of which I stood with the other new chorister. Their shoulders pointed to me like arrows, those standing on the left side of the chapel looked over their right shoulders, those standing on the right side of the chapel looked over their left shoulders. They held their matte

black choir binders in front of their stomachs like shields, with their hands crossed over the spines of the binders. They watched me, as a mother might: knowing, serene, above it all. Protected by time, granted asylum from this humiliation only because they'd already been subjected to it.

“Hey, Dr. Dave!”

“*Louder.*”

“Hey! Dr. Dave!”

Behind him, the organ pipes, wolves' teeth.

“We'll work on it,” he said. Then he lowered his chin in order to look at us more directly over his glasses. The light fell upon his forehead, which lengthened to meet his receding hairline. He held his hand up and folded his flat fingers over his open palm, once, twice, to call us back to the front of the chapel to begin rehearsal. I walked down the aisle, to the front row, and fit myself in with the other sopranos. We opened our music folders. I didn't look at the choristers to my left or right, just straight ahead, the sheet music a white landscape spread before me, Dr. Dave framed between the left and right sheets, with the centerfold directed at his sternum, and his hands now cutting the air like birds in time. I felt half-moons of sweat beneath my arms, I felt a flush of dampness on my upper lip. Why had this simple exercise incited so much shame in me, in my ability, and in the natural behavior of my voice? The voice is as intimate and delicate as sexuality, and the discovery of its capacity should be done in private. Otherwise, freedom, exploration, folly, becomes weighted with the pressure of observation. I never wanted to be exposed in that way again.

2.

I lived on the wrong side of the road — all my friends from junior high lived on the northside. The northsiders went to one public high school, the southsiders went to the other public high school. The kids from intense Christian families went to the private school, which was not considered to be of better academic quality than the public schools, though it cost money to attend. Parents sent their kids there for moral common ground, but in fact, it had a reputation for being a party school. Before high school, every blowjob I'd ever heard of had happened in the bathrooms of the Christian school.

There were a few good things about being a southsider in these circumstances. The most important was that, being deserted, I was free to reinvent myself without scrutiny. No one at my new school knew who I'd been before, so they had no way of judging the authenticity of this Sam; there was no other Sam. They had to accept how I presented myself. For once I felt like I had a handle on everything in my life. I could choose what I wanted people to know, and deliberately conceal the rest. I could no longer be evaluated, and reduced, based upon my company. I had no company.

The other positive was that the southside high school had a superior choral program. There were four different choirs offered: a co-ed chorus with no tryouts, which students joined only to fulfill an arts credit and makeout in practice rooms at lunch; an auditioned all-girls choir for sophomores and juniors; an auditioned upperclassmen co-ed choir that sometimes toured and had retreats; and a highly competitive a capella group, which sang harmonically sophisticated



numbers with cordless mics and was nationally acclaimed. If you were accepted into the a capella group, called the Quarter Tones, you also had to be in the large co-ed auditioned choir — meaning that you would be in choir rehearsals five days a week, and three of those days you'd have two periods of choir. Only the most talented singers at the high school were considered for the Quarter Tones. Winning membership into that group was my ultimate goal.

In my town, we attended junior high through freshman year, and then graduated to high school for our sophomore year. My high school was huge. The entrance was grand, it was four storeys tall. And it was full of boys. Tall, beautiful seniors who would never see me, skinny sophomores with whom I might stand a chance, if I could figure out a reason to talk to them. One of my primary goals was to have my first boyfriend during my sophomore year. I was enrolled in my core classes, all at the honors level, in addition to my electives — choir, French, and debate. In every class, there were boys, except for my choir. I'd been accepted into the auditioned all-girls chorus.

Auditions for the choir had taken place a few weeks before school started, so that we could square away our schedules. We were required to sing alone for the conductor — a short, serious woman with thin, dull hair. Her name was Ms. Kox, a name that quickly united us as a team, at the expense of our conductor. Before we auditioned for her individually, we warmed up as a group. We were instructed to assign ourselves to a voice section based on a self-evaluation of our ranges. Most girls determined that they were sopranos, they walked purposefully to the right side of the room.

“And if you consider yourself to have more ability in sight-reading difficult harmonies,” Ms. Kox said, “you might be needed in the alto or second-soprano sections.”

Some of the girls broke off from the mass and joined the lower voices. I remained in the soprano section, because I was a soprano. I knew my voice, I had flexibility in my upper range and could sing incredibly high at any dynamic. My voice was not distinctive, but a good choral member doesn't try to make their voice stand out; especially a good soprano. There is an art in the uniformity, which I'd learned in Dr. Dave's choir over the last six years. I'd just graduated to the oldest group in the private choir, and though my voice never seemed to emerge in any brilliant way out of the oppressive stage of puberty, I was at least confident and secure in my skills.

We arranged ourselves in rows: the top-heavy soprano section on the right, second-sopranos in the middle, altos on the left. Ms. Kox began by warming us up on scales. She lifted her hands (precise, delicate), and from her own voice, produced middle C, our starting note. I later learned that she had perfect pitch.

"Mi, me, ma, mo, moo," she demonstrated.

She lifted her hands an inch higher, as if releasing a bird into the air. We all inhaled.

At that moment, Elle opened the door, a heavy wooden door with a glass viewing pane, inlaid with wire in a diamond pattern. She entered, angling her body to slip through the gap between frame and door, her shoulders crouched forward as if to make herself inobtrusive, and immediately turned to close the door quietly behind herself. Then she tip-toed across the carpet, directly in front of Ms. Kox. Elle was looking not at the director but at the choir, as if we were all co-conspirators, and smiling at us — she held a finger up to her lips, she lifted her already excessively arched brows — and fit herself into the front row of sopranos. Beside me. Everyone in the room seemed to know Elle, and they all returned her conspiratory smile. Ms. Kox did not.

Elle, beside me, was wearing Victoria's Secret *Love Spell*, a lot of it, and also a lot of makeup — so much that her face appeared almost featureless, it was that heavily masked in foundation. She had no pores at all. Her eyebrows were drawn on in thin, black lines. I later learned that people called them the golden arches behind her back, because they looked like the M of McDonald's. Her hair was black, straight, long, with two channels in the bottom layer that were bleached blonde. She was very petite, the top of her head came up to my chin, and thin, with calves the width of my forearms. I noticed all of this, but what caught my attention was her voice, when we began to warm up. Hers had character. She did not at all have the traditionally cultivated voice of a young female chorister. She had heavy vibrato, and an edge that cut through the sound of the group. I sang with a pure, straight tone, any hint of individuality had been — to my ear — strangled out, there was not even a whisper of vibrato.

I had two combating thoughts: on one hand, I felt that she was being disrespectful of the choral sound, disobedient, defiant, and a bitch, a show-off. I could sing that way if I practiced to cultivate that particular quality. I believed that. It actually took more work, more precision, in order to learn the skill of matching your voice to those around you. Anonymity in the pursuit of a greater harmony.

On the other hand, she represented everything I'd denied myself. Her voice was the voice of a woman, not a girl, like mine. Looking at her, I found myself seeing what I hoped to see when I looked in the mirror.

After we had warmed up, Ms. Kox sent the entire group into the blue-tiled hallway to wait for our individual auditions. Elle turned to me, said that she loved my voice — in those words — and then retreated into a corner with a group of other girls, with whom she was very

physical, familiar, touching their shoulders, pulling on their ponytails, tapping their asses with her hand in order to win the center of attention.

3.

My new mirror was six feet tall and five feet wide. I turned profile. I faced myself. I turned again, opposite profile. I retracted my stomach into my ribcage. I drew my cheeks into the space between my molars, so my face hollowed. Then, if I pulled my shoulders forward and inhaled into the notch at the base of my throat, my clavicles became more pronounced, and the ropes of my neck stood. Just like this, I thought. Don't move. Eventually, of course, I had to move. The dome light in my bedroom, gray-glassed and a dish grave for insects, produced a harsh light and a hard shadow. Flattering only when it hit a sharp angle, of which my body was not composed.

I could pass hours this way, and I did. The mirror had been a gift for my sixteenth birthday, and was the final component of my newly renovated bedroom, updated to confirm the end of my childhood. We removed the wallpaper and painted my room pale green. Most of the other renovations were made to accommodate my closet, which consumed my bedroom. We removed my desk and books to make space for a shelving unit that ran the length of my window wall and displayed my shoes. The unit was composed of two long white rods, parallel tracks with a six-inch gap separating them, one elevated above the other. In this way, the unit served more to present my shoes than to house them. The top row was for high heels, most in disrepair: I wore

them all day on pavement, walking from the main building of my high school to the yellowed portable classrooms across the road. The stilettos, fabricated cheaply, were skinned toward the tip of the heel, the black plastic top lifts were chewed by concrete.

Mom spent every morning, from the minute I woke, yelling at me to hurry. I never hurried. First I tried on this dress, then I added a belt. I added, subtracted, until my outfit cohered masterfully, and I presented myself with careful precision. This process took a long time, because it involved a daily routine of building and stripping in pursuit of a reliable image in the mirror. Is it just the angle, or am I sexy today? I almost always came to the same conclusion: I am sexy today — from this angle. I tightened the straps on my new push-up bra, so that my cleavage was high, white, and central — the band was suspended by the straps and rode up on my back. One at a time, I lifted and positioned my breasts. At one moment I was proud of my height in my red suede wedges, the next mortified at the prospect of towering over the boys in my class; I carefully separated my long, black lashes with the point of a safety pin, then surveyed with horror the way my meticulous mascara seemed to close in on my eyes, littling them, and bringing the focus of my face inward, inward, until the only feature I could see was my long, ridged nose, imperfect, and beyond modification. I ran a bronzer brush over the crest of my nose. Go away, I willed. Reduce your enormity. I willed this to my entire body, every morning while I prepared myself for high school.

“Sam, I’m leaving in five minutes, with or without you,” Mom called.

She wouldn’t. She never did. I examined my reflection once more, irritated at being rushed. The outfit I’d composed the day before, which had looked attractive on the hanger, didn’t cooperate on my body. I switched out the thin belt for a wide, red, leather belt, I tightened it in

order to minimize my width. I kicked the wedges from my feet and chose red ballet flats with pin-sized studs in a crescent shape on the toe box. I put on a seersucker blazer with red poppies embroidered down the sleeves, ceramic red buttons. I took a step backward, another step, in an attempt to see myself truly, fully — or to appear less — in the frame of my mirror.

Mom opened my door and I turned viciously.

“I’m in the car,” she said, standing in my doorway, looking in at me. Cast-off components of my outfit were twisted around my feet, coiled like snakes on the floor.

“I’m ready,” I hissed.

I picked up my backpack, heavy with textbooks, binders, and my music folder. I followed her out of my room. At the top of the stairs, she’d left me a breakfast sandwich folded neatly in tin foil and a travel mug of coffee with sugar and milk.

I got in the car and turned on the same CD that I’d been listening to on repeat for the last two weeks, my first two weeks of high school. I slid my music folder from my backpack and followed along as I sang, and Mom drove in silence. She never complained about my practice. I started the track over, working the first measure. I started it again.

“Are you nervous?” Mom asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You sound fine.”

“I am.”

“I mean that your voice sounds good, you’ll do great on the solo tryouts.”

I started the track over. I ran the first measure, started the track again, and then, as Mom pulled up to the school, I slid my folder into my backpack, took my coffee from the cupholder and left the sandwich on the console.

4.

The front entrance, where my mom dropped me off, was deserted before school started. It was used primarily for performances and events. Some loners sat on the entry steps. It was a concrete flight, as wide as the front facade of the school. Not all of the loners were without company: often they sat in small groups and passed skinny joints around, watching for security. Even when they were together, they seemed alone. I passed them, keeping to the center of the staircase, and entered through the doors to the foyer. Then I went to the fourth floor, and into the bathroom, often empty. Most of the students congregated in the paved courtyard between the gym and the main building until the warning bell rang. But I'd developed, over the first two weeks of school, the habit of waiting here. The bathroom was clean, expectant, unoccupied since the evening janitor's rounds. Toilet seats were flipped up, garbage bins empty. I stalled, playing with a tube of lipgloss: applying, removing, reapplying. I hoped, if anyone entered, that I would appear as if I were in the act of coming or going.

I avoided the courtyard. I was over-aware of myself there, an arena for judgment, where everyone got their first look at one another. It was embarrassingly clear that I was trying too hard, and I couldn't figure out why this hadn't occurred to me before, in the safety of my

bedroom. I suddenly felt the constriction of my belt, and realized its actual effect: pushing my extra weight above and below the noose, and accentuating my width. I saw, with retrospective horror, the care with which I'd matched the poppies on my jacket's sleeves to the red of my shoes, and that every color that appeared in my clothing was doubly represented in my jewelry. I also knew intuitively that the only way I would survive would be through obstinate confidence. I had to own my appearance, my actions. My confidence must show in the ease with which I carried myself. Otherwise all the effort I'd put into making myself over would be for nothing, and then I'd just be Sam, the same Sam, alone at the southside high school. I didn't want to be the same — I wanted to be a new Sam. My vision for this new Sam was to appear creative, intelligent, and bold in my fashion sense, while also exuding sensuality. I wanted to be admired by everyone: girls and boys, students and teachers.

The moment of all of these realizations was simultaneous, and had happened every morning for the past two weeks — the first morning being my debut of the new Sam on the first day of high school. Experiencing the weight of these simultaneous realizations always had the same effect upon me — I was disgusted with myself, and determined to do better. I thought I'd retain some of this feeling the next day, and that it would inform my process in the morning as I prepared for school. But it didn't. In the morning, I was freshly inspired and industrious, picking this accessory, that lipstick, convinced of my taste. Only to be bombarded with reality when I got to school. I looked around at my peers: the girls wore t-shirts, the brand name printed across their chests, and tight jeans with the brand's distinguishing pocket embroidery stitched on their asses. It seemed as if everyone turned to stare when I entered the premises.



So, the courtyard was impossible for me. I was slammed with my image, the image of those around me, and the feeling of being watched, all at once. I had to console myself in solitude, in the fourth-floor bathroom, and then confront the facts in the more manageable scope of the classroom.

A few moments before the tardy bell rang, I commuted from the bathroom to the choir room. Most students were still standing and chatting. I found my seat: I had been assigned to the front row, in the soprano section.

Many of the girls who had been at the audition had ultimately made the cut for the choir, a mixture of incoming sophomores and returning juniors. We'd been placed in voice parts according to need and suitability — almost all of the self-proclaimed sopranos had been knocked down to the middle or lower voice parts. Elle had been placed in the soprano section, which struck me as a dumb choice on Ms. Kox's part. Her voice was too loud and incompatible. A choir should be composed as a triangle: fewer voices at the top, in the soprano section, with the majority of the sound in the alto section, forming the base. Logically, because the upper parts included fewer voices, those voices were under more pressure to match one another and cohere as one composite, shimmering sound. It seemed impossible to me that Elle would be in this smaller group of vocalists. She wasn't willing to sacrifice anything.

At the front of the classroom, there was a long whiteboard, underneath which there was a set of mailboxes labeled for each choir, which contained master copies of the music we were currently rehearsing. The floor was tiered: it ascended away from the front of the class, so that the further back you were from the front, the higher you stood. The tiers were formed by broad, carpeted steps, simulating permanent choral risers. Our chairs were arranged in a wide

semicircle, each row of chairs used one of the broad steps, so that no one row's visibility would be blocked by the row before them.

Ms. Kox stood at the front of the class, with an old grand piano. Stage left, from the edge of the alto section to the windowed wall on the far end, was sectioned off into heavily padded practice rooms. Each practice room had a computer and an upright piano.

A tall, charismatic Mormon girl sat on my left. Lots of Mormons lived in my town, and they were all born talented. Her name was Caroline. She moved theatrically while she sang, bending one knee with a particular drama on the downbeats, so that her whole body bucked in tempo. On my right, Elle. I had learned by this point that she was a junior, a year above me. So far, Elle had forgotten her sheet music twice, and looked on with me. I held my folder with the spine balanced in the palm of my left hand, and the right side of the folder in the bend of my elbow, very stiffly and formally. It created a sort of amphitheater for our voices, and all I could hear was Elle.

In the first week of school, we'd been given the sheet music for a solo opportunity. All interested vocalists would be auditioned at the end of this week, the second week of school. Ms. Kox had also burned CDs for us to listen to as a practice aid, and had uploaded the tracks to the computers in the practice rooms. Since the solo audition had been announced, choristers had been taking their lunches to the practice rooms and rehearsing in teams that formed based upon common lunch periods.

Ms. Kox quieted our class at the start of the period by crashing on the piano. She played a series of disharmonious notes, which, after a few moments of wandering, resolved into a major C chord. Out of the chord, she pulled a vocalization — usually ascending or descending scales;

intervals of thirds and fifths; exaggeratedly slow glissandos from the bottom of an octave to the top, finding every molecular increment between each flat, natural, and sharp. I was familiar with all of these warm ups, warm ups are permutations of the same thing, like a language shared between all choirs.

Ms. Kox never paused between vocalizations, unless she needed to make a minor adjustment in the way we produced sound. She was a scientist. She might critique the way we shaped a vowel by screwing up her face and mimicking the ugly, nasally attempt that she heard. Then, instead of making a suggestion with her words, she demonstrated the proper production of this vowel.

For example: if we made an ugly “e” sound, she wrinkled her nose, stretched her mouth into a thin line — so her lips disappeared — and then tilted her head left and right, like a child teasing another child, while singing an “e” vowel. Then, acting out a wholly different character, she stood up straight, held her hand before her face like a magician, with her fingers fanned in a baroque pose, and pursed her lips forward in a fishlike pucker — you could see just two of her top and two of her bottom teeth, her lips in an almost perfect rectangle — and sang an “e” vowel in a very different, more regal way. She said nothing. She just demonstrated, like this, and then held her hands before her, lifted them subtly to indicate our breath, and waited for us to mimic her correction.

After Ms. Kox had run us through our warm ups, she pulled out the piece of music that we had all been practicing in preparation for solo tryouts. We followed suit. She angled her body toward stage right, the soprano section, and nodded to the girl sitting at the far end of the front row.

“Starting here,” Ms. Kox said. “If you don’t want the solo, you can skip. Otherwise, sing starting from measure thirteen.”

Ms. Kox sang the starting note, and the test began.

5.

Whenever I had to sing alone in front of others, I got acid reflux immediately. I also worried until the moment that I opened my mouth that I would miss the starting note, come in on the wrong beat, or immediately forget the lyrics. I was superstitious, and had a series of diversions that I performed for fear that if I didn’t, I would fail. For a solo tryout like this one, I would avoid eating in case it coated my vocal cords, I would very quietly hum the starting note until it was my turn to sing, circle every note in the music that presented a possibility for a mistake, repeat an encouraging mantra in my mind, and cross my fingers under my music folder.

I hadn’t always been this way. I used to find confidence in performing in front of others, and pride myself on it, when I was a kid. The superstitions started in Dr. Dave’s choir and developed over time. After my first choir performance with Dr. Dave, my mom pulled me aside to tell me that I’d been the only girl in the choir who was looking around at the audience, beaming as though I were in a Broadway performance. She said I’d stuck out, and I looked foolish, it was evident that performers behaved differently in classical choirs. She advised me to ask my director what was correct; of course I couldn’t ask him. Instead, I began to observe the

other choristers, and noticed their militaristic behavior. No one smiled; the girls were stoic and erect, every vowel was shaped carefully and identically in every mouth.

The soldierly discipline went beyond our sound and self-carriage, and extended to our aesthetic presentation. For our concerts, we were all required to wear tight plaits that kept our hair off of our faces; our dresses — black, long-sleeved and floor-length — were uniform, too. Each girl was checked by a troop of volunteer mothers before the concerts. Every earring, bracelet, necklace, was unclasped and placed into a plastic baggie with our name written on the front. Nail polish was removed, attempts at loud makeup were intercepted, hair bands were taken from our wrists.

I quickly acclimated to this scrupulous uniformity. In fact, I found some comfort in it. The structure thwarted any possibility of standing out, so it also absolved me of the desire to stand out. This translated almost immediately into my singing, and how I identified with my voice. I came to understand my voice best in relation to other voices. There were new criteria for vocal excellence. Now, my voice felt beautiful when I experienced it melting into the surrounding texture. I almost could not hear myself, my voice was so exactly matched; our joined sound was more satisfying than my voice, alone, could ever be. In a sense, its currency came from its invisibility. If I was asked to sing alone, and was stripped of a backdrop against which I could blend, then I found myself not just exposed, but without value. It felt as though all of my good qualities — my skill in blending, the purity of my tone — were useless.

After Ms. Kox's solo auditions, we ran through our repertoire and then were dismissed. I wanted to disappear, I wished that I was wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, I reprimanded myself for calling so much attention to my appearance — it suggested that I thought I was special. That I

craved the limelight. And I did, but that was my secret. My audition had come and gone unremarkably. I actually couldn't remember if I'd sung at all, I was so disembodied from the experience. I had no control over my voice, when it came down to the important moment. Whatever muscle memory I'd developed took over. What had my body done — had I moved, or was I still? Had I bothered to incorporate any varied dynamics, or had I sung in a pathetic whimper, or worse, had I hollered?

The bell rang. I slid my folder into my backpack and stood. I adjusted my dress, the fabric had inched up beneath my belt. I pulled it down, a relieving sensation to feel the pressure of fabric smooth and straighten. I had to make myself feel organized. Elle walked out of the classroom beside me. She wore skinny black jeans and checkered Vans, a t-shirt. She slid her arm through my elbow. This surprised me — and then she clamped down, pinning my arm against her ribcage, consequently pulling my face down to hers, as if she wanted to tell me a secret, or she was about to threaten me.

“You’re getting that solo,” she said. She said it like a threat.

She jammed her bony elbow — a dagger — into my side. I shook my head and said something dismissive, but essentially wordless, in response.

“It will be you or the alto with the red hair, but I never remember her name so she can’t be worth remembering.”

“Carly,” I said.

“Want me to poison her lunch?”

I laughed.

“That’s a yes. But if I get caught, I’m bringing you down with me.”

She unthreaded her arm from mine. I straightened to my full height. We walked in silence for a moment, descended the stairs. I was headed for the second floor.

“Which lunch do you have?” she asked.

“Second,” I said. “I think I saw you in the practice rooms this week.”

“Yeah, mine’s second, too. Want to practice the new song today?”

“Sure,” I said — not at all sure what that would look like, not sure whether I liked the idea or dreaded it. Sure only that it wouldn’t make sense for me to turn down her invitation.

Not that I was worried about meeting people at my new school — I always made friends. It’s just that this time, I wanted to be somehow more important. I wanted to be better seen, and more admirable. At the least, I wanted to be different from how I was.

Becoming friends with Elle would mean I was something different. Anyone could see that I was trading up. An investment in Elle was an investment in myself. My primary concern was with fairness, and it wasn’t fair that all my life, I’d been categorized according to the people with whom I associated, and kept from an elusive — but attainable — popularity. If that was how the world worked, I wanted to make the world work for me.

6.

Elle sat against the window wall. She had kicked off her Vans, her feet were bare: she hadn’t been wearing socks. The odor was sharp. Whether it came from the shoes or the feet, I didn’t know. Her toenails were painted white.

“Do you play piano?” she asked.

“Some.”

She balanced a red and white checkered paper food tray on top of her bent knees. It was filled with coin-sized chicken nuggets, very pale gold, and all perfectly round. Although they were bite-sized — on the cafeteria menu, they were even marketed as bite-sized — she ate each of them in at least three small bites. She had a bottle of Sprite and a chocolate chip muffin. She took one coin of chicken between her finger and thumb, took a very small bite. With her other hand, she picked up the food tray and put it on the carpet beside her soda and muffin. Then she got up from the carpet, sat down on the piano bench, finished the nugget she was holding, and wiped her hands on her jeans.

She played a chord, and then repeated it, in time: one, two, three, four. The same chord, no ornaments or variations in tempo. She seemed moved, and appeared to be generating emotional momentum. Her hair was tucked behind her ears neatly, but two strips fell, also neatly, before her face. Still barefoot, she lingered on the sustain pedal, paying out a dramatic vamp. The small room was saturated in the overlapping notes.

I was sitting against the wall that was opposite the windows. I brought my lunch with me, too, but it was the standard hot lunch option. I’d eaten hot lunch every day all my life, and once I moved up to high school, it hadn’t crossed my mind that I could use the money I was given for lunch on items at the snack bar — jojos, pizza, bagels, chicken nuggets, instant noodles. My lunch looked overlarge compared to Elle’s, and somehow, hers seemed cooler. I ordinarily ate everything on my plate, I wasn’t picky at all and was always hungry. But I felt self-conscious, and shoved food around, limiting myself on principle.



I positioned my body toward Elle, so that it would be clear that I wasn't just idly eating, but really interested in what she was putting forth on the piano, and listening closely.

Elle began to sing. The melody was simple but dark, and hovered around a low register, where her voice came more comfortably, and sounded lush. As she sang, she seemed to produce sound without effort, a sensation that was fleeting to me. The melody was repetitive. I put my lunch down beside me on the carpet and bent my knees, sliding my feet as close to my body as possible, so my thighs pressed against my chest. I folded my arms over them, and closed my own eyes. I propped my chin on the flat surface of my knees. Using long and atmospheric vowels, I began to sing along with Elle, finding the third above, and playing in that range to create a harmony line. I followed her voice like a shadow, intuiting her musical decisions.

Immediately, the air became charged in an almost dangerously thrilling way. Between our two voices, there was no tonal difference at all. The straightness of my own tone allowed for her to use vibrato freely without any possibility of falling out of synch. Our voices together were in perfect order, as if they had been made to blend with one another. There was no decision or conversation. I felt the exact moment when she began listening to me, and our voices left us and created something else. It sounded as if one voice had been amplified and split.

At the end of the song, she held a note powerfully, and I followed her. I predicted — she liked to ride the sustain pedal — that she would want this note to ring, to hang in the air afterward, to have its own life after us. So we both cut the note, at the same moment exactly, and let our voices erupt in the space between us and then dissipate, like the falling sparks of a firework, and the air afterward seemed low and dense and electrified, like the dull sulfuric smoke

that clouds a horizon after a show. Both of us were too elated, too high on the suspense to break the moment.

Eventually we opened our eyes to one another. She dropped her jaw, simultaneously letting her head drop a notch, still holding eye contact. Then she lifted her hands to her temples — all her fingertips were pressed together to create a beak of each hand. She pressed the tips of her fingers against her temples and then exploded them outward in slow motion, mouthing “boom.” I nodded.

Elle slid from the piano bench and sat in front of me, cross-legged, and picked her paper tray of chicken nuggets up off the carpet. She popped one into her mouth, whole.

“Our voices are perfect together,” she said, her mouth full.

“Yours is perfect, I just know how to harmonize.”

“No, yours is perfect, and together, our voices are actually insane.”

She picked up my fork and took a bite of my lunch, and then split her muffin into parts, and put half on my plate. For the remainder of the period, we ate, mostly in silence, and agreed when the warning bell rang that we would meet in the cafeteria every day and go to the practice rooms with our lunches.

7.

I see my development through life as a series of episodes, each one named for a different friend. For me, there was always one paramount companion who reigned in each period of my

life, and our friendship had a season. Like clockwork, a new friend picked me up where the last friend set me down, and walked me through a cycle, at the end of which I was picked up by someone different. I was never alone. With each girl there was a new start, followed by a new drama, and I came out a new Sam.

Any time I remember an important event in my life, it's remembered in tandem with that friend, in whose era the event took place. When I think of my father's affair and disappearance, I remember Alyssa; I was six. When I think of my first kiss, with a dense but polite boy from summer camp, I remember Katie better than the boy with whom I shared the kiss; I was ten.

It's not that every momentous event in my life happened together with a friend. It's that the friend was so closely knit into my own understanding of myself that in everything I did, she was abstractly present. She was me, and I was her. I had adopted her patterns and habits, and she'd adopted mine. I cared so deeply about her opinions that they became my opinions. I knew her mind so well that sometimes I mistook hers for my own. Invitations extended to one of us were unacceptable; they must be inclusive. And when someone insulted her, they insulted me; if my friend was complimented, my heart purred as if the compliment had been paid to me.

In short, I depended on her to complete my image. Therefore, though my devotion could be interpreted as profound empathy and loyalty, it was actually egotism. The emotional energy that I invested in my friend was an investment in myself: the better my friend was, the better I was.

Not by any conscious decision of my own, it just so happened that in every case, I met my friend in the context of group singing. This began in my children's chorus at six years old, and carried forward throughout my life.

During the period of junior high, my best friend was a girl named Keala. Keala and I met in our first year of junior high school chorus. We had everything in common, except our appearances: I was very pale, suffered mild breakouts, and I burned in the sun, and she had even, unblemished, dark skin; she had a more commercially pretty face than I did, all soft lines and a natural smile. Our body types, however, were the same. We were both tall, neither of us rail-thin — which was the figure we admired — but not overweight. We were average. Our bodies never seemed to change, even when we stopped eating, and though we both loved to shop, we hated trying on jeans. At that time, it was all hiphuggers, and we were all hips. We were both enrolled in the honors program, we both liked to sing, and together, we were strange, silly, and we were neurotic — especially about how we looked.

We found in each other all the affirmation that we needed at that time in our lives. I promised Keala that she was gorgeous, and she promised the same to me, we admired one another's slim arms and tiny waistlines. We also passed much of our time alone together; we were weird girls. We made up juvenile songs, watched pornography in secret, and entertained one another by improvising scenes. The first year was especially intense between us. We only had one another's voice in our heads. After a period of obsessive friendship, we decided together (it was one mind) that we wanted to be popular. We were fanatical about boys, and popularity was the most obvious way to win a boyfriend. We made the rest of our junior high experience about this new ambition. Our choice pastime was hunting potential romances in a systematic and businesslike way. Together, we drafted plans, we made joint attacks. We followed cute strangers and found ways to make conversation with them, devised reasons to run into the boys we liked.

But throughout our junior high years, we found the pursuit to be in vain. Popularity evaded us, boys avoided us. I blamed her.

Keala joined my private choir not long after we became friends, so although she had been sent to the northside high school and I attended the southside high school, we still saw one another at least two times a week for rehearsals. She was a second soprano, and sang very correctly; this is how she did most things. Like me. She was very studious with her music and practiced it with her mom, who was a music teacher at an elementary school and played the piano very well. Keala was the type of student who was never without a pencil to mark her score, and sat obediently on the edge of her seat. When it was not her turn to sing, she conducted along with Dr. Dave behind her music binder. She was not without talent, but her voice was unremarkable. What helped her stand out in the group was the fact that she never missed a note, and had an ear for harmony, so you could trust her to hold a lower part even when we were sightreading.

While I struggled in the southside high school to resist falling into the same old type of friend group that I had always been in, Keala inherited our friends from junior high. She found the transition to high school easy, but had given up on the quest for popularity, and accepted her identity as a smart, quiet, and secretly weird girl. Since high school started, we'd initiated a new tradition of having dinner together after our private choir rehearsals. One of our parents would drive us to a fast food restaurant.

On the day of my solo tryouts at the high school, there was also afternoon rehearsal for Dr. Dave's choir. Keala and I went out to KFC afterward. I ordered what I always did: a biscuit

with honey, macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes and gravy, and corn on the cob. Keala got popcorn chicken and coleslaw. We made her mom sit at a separate table.

I told Keala that there had been solo tryouts at my school that day, that I'd totally blown the audition, but the solo wasn't in my style anyway, so I was already over it. I bragged that Ms. Kox was really a genius, she was the best conductor I had ever seen in my life. And at lunch, I told Keala, everyone went to the practice rooms and sang; people were very committed at the southside school, I told her, it was inspiring. The main feeling I had after two weeks was *inspired*. I wanted to be the best chorister I could be.

I hesitated before telling Keala about Elle, but the step seemed so decisively in favor of my future popularity that I couldn't contain my excitement. I wanted Keala to know.

"I practiced with a cool soprano today at lunch. Our voices matched perfectly. It's hard to explain," I said. I buttered half of my biscuit and then drizzled it in honey. "It was actually insane."

"What makes a soprano cool?"

"I mean she's cool, and she's a soprano, they're two separate adjectives."

"Well that sounds cool." Keala got up to refill her soda. When she returned, she didn't say anything to pick up the conversation. She focused on her food, eating it mechanically. As she swallowed one piece of popcorn chicken, she was already ferrying another piece into her mouth.

"Okay then," I said.

Keala grimaced, narrowing her eyes and pressing her lips together, turning her chin minutely to one side as if she'd just witnessed an act of violence.

“I’m happy you’re making new friends,” she said, her voice low, and her lips barely moving. She didn’t make eye contact with me as she spoke. “I really am.”

“You don’t seem happy,” I said, very plainly.

“I’m just jealous, you should understand that.”

I wanted to counter her immediately, but she seemed determined to prove herself right, so I let her continue. I knew that I could ultimately outmaneuver any effort of pathos that she utilized to try to make her point. She always relied on emotional appeals.

“It’s just,” she said, “I’m with our same old friends, in the northside high school, which has an inferior choral program. I feel like you should be a little more sympathetic and not rub your new life in my face, since I’m still living our old life.” Keala took a drink of her soda and swallowed very slowly, her forehead creased and her brows pulled in toward each other, as if it took great effort to get the soda down. “Only now, it’s without you,” she finished. Then she took a long, shuddering breath, as if it had been very hard to say what she’d just said.

I let the silence between us take on some weight before I responded.

“I get that,” I said, my voice was tempered. I showed no consternation or stress in my expression. “I really do. And I’m sorry. But I’ve been in hell for two weeks, totally abandoned. If you cared at all, you’d be happy for me; you have tons of good friends, and I have one.”

I didn’t specify whether I was referring to her, or to Elle, as my one good friend. I watched her consider this ambiguity. Keala’s mom had seen a change in our behavior and tone, and approached our table from where she’d been sitting. She asked us if we wanted her to buy a slice of chocolate chip bundt cake. We both answered simultaneously — Keala, yes; me, no.

8.

“Move the fuck on, Grandpa,” Elle said. She laid on her horn.

“Don’t talk like that to your grandfather,” I said. I carefully lifted my latte to my lips. I waited. Elle hit a speedbump without slowing, and we heard a fatal crunch. I took a drink.

Elle reached out to receive the latte. I placed it in her cupped hand. She took a drink and passed it back, without looking at me. “No one in this town knows how to drive.”

She swerved into the opposite lane, grinding on her horn as she passed the Subaru in front of us. When she finally released the horn, we heard two others sounding: the Subaru’s — she’d cut him off — and the horn of a little red car coming at us, with which Elle had just barely missed a collision.

A track on Elle’s CD ended and the next began. Elle played the same mix on repeat. I already had the melody of every track memorized, and a lot of the lyrics. We both harmonized with the vocalists, one of us taking the third above the melody, and the other taking the third below. Most of the singers were men with voices that sounded pinched and bottled, men with unusually developed upper registers, who sounded somewhat like women themselves, and whose songs therefore suited our own vocal range comfortably.

Both windows of the car were rolled down, and Elle had kicked her shoes off and thrown them in the backseat. Their smell, or the smell of her feet themselves, however consistent, never became easier to ignore. She drove with one foot on the pedal and the other propped on the



doorframe, out the open window, with her bare toes pressed against the side view mirror, the humidity of the soles of her feet making crescents of condensation on the mirror's glass.

Neither of us wore a seatbelt. For her, this was a habit. For me, it was an effort. When I got in Elle's car, I started to put on my seatbelt, and then intentionally let go of it. I had never gone without a seatbelt, and never saw much of a point in not wearing one: it was easy enough, and safer. But Elle naturally conveyed a message — radical acceptance of fate — and I was striving to establish new habits that matched her worldview. I sat with one leg folded underneath me, and the other resting on the dash.

We both wore dresses. Outside it was cool and overcast, most days were in our town on the northwestern coast. But we didn't pay attention to the weather when we picked our outfits. My dress came down to my knees, with a floral print and an intentionally frayed hem. It was tight on my upper body, and at the waistline became full. The top, layered in a crocheted design, exposed my upper back; my skin showed through the knitted layer. It tied behind my neck with brown leather laces. I'd hiked the laces up as tightly as I could. Elle's dress was simple, sleeveless, and gray, made of jersey.

She was the first person in her class to have a car. Her father had given it to her in the summer after her freshman year, on her sixteenth birthday, just after she narrowly passed her driving test. She was almost a year older than everyone else in her class. I'd just turned sixteen, and was on the older side of the sophomore class. But she was, as a junior, seventeen years old — she would be eighteen before she started her senior year. We were all very far from the sort of freedom she had.

She drove to and from school every day, like the seniors. Sometimes she drove off campus at lunch and picked up fast food downtown; when she did, she brought me along. At night, she could tell her dad that she was going to one place, and then simply drive to another. Her father attempted to control her use of the car, but now that she had it, the most he could do was take it away. And when he did take it away from her, he suffered as much as she did. His life reverted. He had to adhere to Elle's schedule, was forced to work around her academic and extracurricular commitments, in which she became more seriously involved whenever her father took the car away. So it wasn't often that Elle was without the car, or without freedom.

Elle's car, a 2002 Volkswagen Jetta in dull champagne, smelled like crayons — something everyone noticed, but for which no one could never find a source. Years later I rode in another Volkswagen, I was hit immediately with the same familiar scent, and was returned to the passenger seat of Elle's Jetta. I learned from the driver that all Volkswagens made during that period have a wax coating on the interior of the car meant to prevent corrosion, which produces the smell. Even after learning the source of the scent, it seemed foreign in any car besides Elle's. I've always associated that particular odor — melting candles — with her, and the hours we spent in her Jetta.

It started to rain. Elle reluctantly withdrew her left bare foot from where it was propped on the window frame. We both rolled up our windows, and the car immediately began to fog with our breath, closing in on the windshield. The music was loud, louder now without the sound of air ripping through the open windows. At the intersection downtown, she slowed and pulled into the parking lot outside of the coffeeshop. Elle turned off the car. The engine ticked.

Elle kept a pitch pipe on her dashboard. She leaned forward to pick it up out of the corner of the dash and windshield, where it slid on an sharp turn. Then she played the starting note for an Eric Whitacre song we'd been learning in choir. She replicated the note, on the word *stretched*. I came in on the second word, *out*, taking the harmony line. This had become routine to us — every time she parked the Jetta, we sat in the new silence, and sang something before leaving the car. She closed her eyes and folded her knees so that they were pinned against the steering wheel. She wore a hemp cord around her right ankle. Her feet were dirty, and her dress slipped down her thighs, gathering around her thin hips. I began to sing along, taking the harmony line. I also tucked my knees up on the glovebox, sliding down in the passenger seat, allowing my feet to dangle, the flip flops to slide and drop into the footwell. The fog crept from the rubber seam of the door up the four side windows, and from the horizon of the windshield it spread like ice. The world was obscured. The sound of our voices emptied the car, vacuumed it of everything but us. It seemed to pull the air from the glass. I also closed my eyes, and the sensation of space then moved to my ears, and away from my eyes: in those moments, I understood the synonymy of fullness and emptiness.

When we reached the end of the song, Elle didn't open her eyes right away. I did, and I watched her. She breathed slowly, through her nose, widening her nostrils as she inhaled. She lifted a hand to her face and twirled her nose ring. Her phone buzzed in the center cupholder. It buzzed again — an incoming call. Without moving her position, Elle picked up her phone and lifted it in front of her face so that she could see the name on the front screen. India, her best friend.

She put it back into the cupholder and it continued to vibrate, three more rings. When it stopped, Elle sat up and looked at me.

“India doesn’t like you,” she said.

“But I don’t even know her,” I was immediately defensive — the worst thing is to be disliked. It’s worse even than being unknown.

“She knows what I’ve told her.”

“What have you told her?”

“I told her that we were friends,” Elle said. She started braiding one of her columns of bleached hair.

I thought about that for a while. I liked being at the center of her conflict with India, as if I were a viable threat to their closeness.

“Well, I can understand that,” I said. I drained the rest of the latte from my cup; we’d buy another when we went into the coffeeshop. “I guess Keala doesn’t like you either.”

Elle reached over the center console and pushed the top of my knees with her open palm, I slid them off of the glovebox and sat up, slipping my flip flops back onto my feet and running my fingers through my hair, a habit that I’d developed recently. I had thick, dirty blonde hair, and the more I combed it with my fingers, the more came out in loose weaves around my knuckles. I twisted up the strands I’d freed. Elle opened the glovebox and pulled out a stack of folded papers, all of them covered in writing, the writing in all different colors and consistencies of ink.

She looked through them for a moment, and then selected one from the pile. She tilted it toward me so that I could read. The handwriting was feminine, but stiffly composed, as if every

character had been an effort. On the front of the paper, it read “To: Elle,” the colon was made of little hearts, and the ink was in a translucent purple. Beneath that, it read “From: Isaac.”

“Who’s Isaac?”

She unfolded the letter.

“I shouldn’t even show you this,” Elle said. She handed it to me.

I scanned the letter quickly, almost nervously. You are flawless, it read, you’re the most beautiful, perfect girl in school, everyone wishes they could be you, or be with you. You are unparalleled. You are the definition of desire. I am so lucky. Love, Isaac.

The letter was at once innocent and disconcerting, I identified its appeal immediately: it contained everything that a girl our age would like to hear about herself, with no danger, no indication of some underlying expectations. The letter contained no demand for reciprocation or gratitude. All it asked of its reader was to receive.

Elle looked at me, slimming her eyes. She was trying to read my face. Then she laughed, a sort of forced and humorless laugh, a compression, a short, sharp puff of air, through her nose. She shook her head, screwed up her eyebrows in an expression of pity — for me, for herself, or for the author of the letter? I couldn’t tell.

“Isaac doesn’t exist,” she said, “India is Isaac. When I wrote her letters back, my name was Evan.”

I remember that the first thought that occurred to me when I heard this information was a flood of panic, followed immediately by an equal wave of determination. First the question: is this what I have to do? And then, I knew my answer. I knew it intuitively, because it skipped the

process of reasoning. The intuition was visceral, and beyond the league of articulation: I'd do whatever was required of me in order to be Elle's friend.

Elle took the letter from me, folded it back in half, put it in the pile, and returned the stack to the glovebox. She closed it. I felt an immediate need to read through every letter and see what was said, and I made a mental note to find some moment when I was alone in the Jetta to look through them. I never had the chance; the next time I looked in the glovebox, they were gone.

9.

I placed a hand on Elle's shoulder, as if to restrain her, and scanned the expanse of my closet; looking over my shoulder at Elle, at the closet, back at Elle. I released her with a step forward, and approached the stage of fabrics. Each hanger snapped dully as I ran my fingertips along their bony shoulders. My clothing was organized according to color. I moved through the whites. I moved through the creams.

Elle watched, her brows in their static frowns, as I paused every few moments to study an item more closely. I selected a shapeless shift dress of deep burgundy with a black lip of fabric at the hem and around the openings for the neck and arms, and a sewn-in mesh slip that hung an inch longer than the toplayer. Then I pulled out a black oversized blazer with a goldenrod yellow satin lining, and cuffed the sleeves so the satin showed. Elle couldn't borrow shoes from me, her feet being three sizes smaller than mine, so whatever outfit she wore would have to go with her checkered Vans.

Whenever I dressed Elle, I was careful to only choose clothing that was either unisize or had no definable line. I couldn't stand the idea of Elle trying on some piece of tailored clothing, which hugged my frame closely and traced hers with an inch of excess. Sometimes she complained that I withheld my favorite clothes from her, she wanted to borrow a specific item and I resisted, but I think she knew the real reason and was just torturing me vaguely. It was for the same reason that we never broached the topic of jeans or pants, it was too humiliating to imagine the difference in our proportions. She must have quietly acknowledged and respected that, because she never said a word about trying on a pair of mine. I hardly ever wore pants, anyway.

Elle was an obedient mannequin, she undressed and dressed again in the outfit I had selected. If she doubted my choice, she didn't tell me. I preferred her in my clothing, and I think she did, too. We matched in our aesthetic, and when there are two, it makes some sort of thematic sense that it doesn't with just one. I felt more comfortable with her, and also with myself, when she appeared as carefully composed as I did.

The outfit hung from her in the way I wished that it would hang from me. The blazer was square on her shoulders, and the masculine cut emphasized her femininity. She turned away from me to look in the mirror, and spun a few times on her heel to check her angles. She popped the collar on the blazer and put her hair up. Then she found my digital camera on my shelf and pulled me into the frame of the mirror with her arm linked through mine, dragging me down to her height as she did the day that I met her.

We took a series of photos together. First smiling and looking down into the LCD display on the camera so that our faces appeared coy, with our eyes downcast. Then back to back,

looking into the reflection of the lens in the mirror. We took one with our inside arms draped over one another's frames, outside arms bent, with our hands rooted to our outer hips. If we cranked our elbows back, this elongated our collarbones, lengthening the presentation of our chests. Alternatively, if we cranked our elbows forward, this hollowed our collarbones and our stomachs caved inward, the dome light hit the lines we created in our bodies and left vaulted shadows where our skin cupped delicately. Elle taught me that — how to create sharp angles where there were none. Once we finished taking pictures, we left the house to go to the mall, the teenage capital of suburbia.

It was just after school on a weekday, so the parking lot was an empty court, vast and meaningless. Without consumers it seemed like an arbitrary clearing. The rules of a parking lot were absurd when the whole expanse belonged to us. The lanes extended from the grand archway of the mall entrance to the curb of the lot, but the spaces were vacant except for those close to the entrance and some pairs of cars on the fray of the lot, where people met to sell weed or carpool. Elle turned into the lot off of the main road and then proceeded diagonally, following the same trajectory on which she entered and ignoring the regulation of the white printed lanes. She crossed them, and the empty parking spaces, picking up speed. Then she turned abruptly into a slot near the building and slammed the Jetta into park.

We were listening to a whiney alternative punk band, frontmanned by a vampiric tenor with soft, feminine features — Elle's type. The tempo was urgent, and the lyrics outlined an intricate saga. We had each word memorized and emphasized the consonants with a degree of pride, staring each other down as we did, leaning in, spitting as if engaged in a fight. With Elle it was always a competition disguised as a performance. The tenor sang with a faintly operatic



bravado and his range sat directly in the middle of our shared range. Though the pace was breakneck, we both made a point to harmonize on almost every note. Neither of us would let go of our harmony line, and the pileup of darting notes, all moving together quickly and in parallel, transformed the song into a calamitous chant. We got high on our ability to prove competence. The sound was unhinged, satanic, but we were starkly opposed to the idea of subjective beauty in music. It was boring, and we hated anything boring. We were committed to the mad rush, and convinced that with our combined talent, we could revolutionize popular taste. The rules of musical beauty seemed as arbitrary in that moment as the painted lines in an empty parking lot, meant only to organize an assumption, or to keep an invisible order. Elle turned off the car. The silence was immediate, and bloomed out of the panicked harmonies we'd been producing.

She leaned back and closed her eyes, sang middle C. I matched it, and we stayed there awhile. We'd begun to hear the capacity of one another's lungs. I could tell when she was running out of breath. We took turns fading out imperceptibly to sip another breath and then reunite. That way, the note never ceased, but only ebbed. I bravely flattened my note, to create the stinging, grating dissonance of two notes so marginally separated that they wanted nothing more than to resolve into each other. We improvised. For us, music often replaced conversation. It was more intimate and revealing than any other type of conversation I'd experienced. Even if I'd wanted to keep anything from Elle, I wouldn't have been able to. We'd trained ourselves to read each other's minds.

We entered the mall through the Food Court, walked a lap, and then came back to Jamba Juice to buy 24-ounce carrot-orange juices with light ice. We brought them to a bench in the main corridor and sat beside a temporary sales booth that was marketing cell phone cases and

fur-lined slippers. Here, we sipped our tall, electrically orange drinks very slowly and scouted out attractive boys.

We'd developed a routine. When a couple of guys walked by, we locked eyes, watched them pass, and waited an appropriate amount of time before we stood. We began walking in the same direction in which they were headed. I'd done this a million times with Keala, but we'd never met the kind of success that Elle and I had been consistently having. I could only assume it came from some combined mystery, our eclectic outfits and our contrasting bodies. Maybe Elle just had something in her eyes that we'd lacked. Or maybe, I hoped, Elle and I had something in our eyes that Keala lacked.

Whatever the reason, when the boys noticed us following a few lengths behind them, they would find a reason to pause — to look through the sales rack at the temporary calendar booth in the middle of the aisle, or examine sneakers on display outside of Journey's. Sometimes they wouldn't even pretend to look for a diversion, and would just stand to the edge of the corridor, hands in their pockets, talking to each other and smirking in our direction.

When we got close, Elle and I would find a new bench and sit down, talk to each other with intensity, drink our orange drinks, and wait for them to approach. They always did. Somehow Elle knew how to talk to them, and I began to make a study of her technique. She was never eager, but self-possessed, and open, and the willingness of her laughter was sensual. I couldn't decide whether I resented her for her ease, or was grateful to be associated with it. I figured I was better off in her shadow, because at least I was in the picture. My proximity to her sexuality gave me an added dimension, and usually one of the boys would gravitate toward me.

Sometimes we walked a circuit with them, in pairs; other times they gave us their cell phone numbers on scraps of paper.

Today there were no cute boys in the mall, and none in the arcade, so we went to a high-end bohemian clothing shop and tried on outfits instead. It was a store that I shopped at all the time — I spent every dollar I had on clothes — but that Elle had never visited. We went to the discount rack. She picked out a patterned maxi dress and a pair of strappy gladiator sandals, an outfit I would have chosen for myself. I chose a cropped crocheted sweater with mismatched wooden buttons. Then we admired the full-price clothing, faux motorcycle jackets and heeled leather boots, and imagined having enough money to buy everything we wanted, instead of just items that were on sale.

We ordered a cinnamon-sugar pretzel at Auntie Anne's with cream cheese frosting and sat in the Food Court. I cut it in half, measuring each ear of the pretzel to make sure it was equal.

"It's fucked up that some people have so much money, and we have barely any," Elle said. She ripped off a piece of pretzel, dipped it in the plastic cup of frosting, and then chewed it meditatively, looking down into the swirl of white sugar, now contaminated with cinnamon. She swallowed, but didn't look up. "I just spent all my money on this outfit. And it's probably a piece of shit anyway, it was on sale."

"Just because it was on sale doesn't mean it's a piece of shit," I said.

She ignored me.

"Some girls just use their parents' credit cards and get whatever they want," she continued, "which gives them an automatic unfair advantage, and that sort of thing carries over into your whole life."

“Other people have it worse,” I said.

She nodded. “But we could have it a lot better.”

She pulled out one of her new sandals and turned it over in her hand, handling it with regret, disgust. Then she put it back in her shopping bag.

Before we left, we stopped at Hollister. The store was kept very dimly lit, the front wall was made of French doors with a dark stain and deeply tinted windows. Inside we felt as though we were part of something exclusive. The customers there wore very serious expressions and shopped as if they were choosing a suspect from a lineup. They seemed to have something specific in mind. Elle and I guessed that management kept the lights low so that you couldn’t read the price tags.

We could afford nothing at full price, but the brand was popular — a status symbol — so we liked to go, if only to claim our right to be there. We checked the sales section. Sometimes they had ugly and ill-fitting shirts that we could afford. Maybe we’d buy one, if it said Hollister across the chest.

On a mounted screen, the store displayed information about the music that was playing. Today they played a strange, sexy, and adult song. It sounded foreign. A French-German duo, I later learned. *I am naked, mmmm, I am naked, so what?* We wrote down the name of the song, sprayed the house perfume on our wrists, and asked for a spare bag to put our jackets in — we were tired of carrying them around. We really just wanted to be seen with bags from Hollister. Then we made one last lap, smelling our sweet wrists, shifting our shopping bags from one hand to the other. Finding no new boys, we left out the doors through which we’d entered.

10.

I kept a stool in the bathroom in front of the sink, so I could sit down while I did my makeup in a magnifying mirror. The mirror haloed my reflection with a band of fluorescent light. The ring of light also reflected in my pupils, and overexposed my image so that I appeared pure, flawless. I was learning new makeup techniques from Elle, and she was learning from me. I convinced her that fuller brows were popular, and she was beginning to pluck less aggressively. She taught me how to mask my entire face in mineral foundation, including my lips, the dish of my philtrum, the outer walls of my nostrils, the curve of my septum, all the way to the lobes of my ears, bringing it down from the jawline and blending the cream into the flesh of my neck. Then I could create an artificial sculpt in my cheekbones with a slightly deeper foundation. On top of that, a rose cheek tint.

I hated the heaviness that liquid foundation leant to my face. The border between the surface of my skin and the air was thickened, clogged, so that I lost my conception of where my face ended and the atmosphere outside my face began. It seemed as though my nerves were anesthetized. Smiling was an effort, I had to fight against an external pressure in order to produce a smile. It was like opening my eyes underwater.

Despite my initial aversion to such heavy makeup, I had to admit that I looked more like a certain type of girl — or at least more like Elle. My flaws melted into an indistinct plane. It is amazing the confidence that can be produced by erasing the irregularities, both attractive and ugly, from your face. To make your skin into an illusion. Plasticine non-skin, perfect in its

standardization. Skin that is a burden but also a shield. Skin that is a shell, beneath which you might be anyone, while looking just like everyone else — like no one. I now dressed my face with the same intricacy and care with which I dressed my body, sometimes removing the entire attempt and beginning again. Still, I refused to wake any earlier than the last possible moment. My mom had begun to lose her patience with me.

She came into my room very early and drew up my blackout shade, releasing a seal of cold air, just to piss me off. I said nothing, but pulled my comforter over my face as she switched on my overhead light. She stood there, watching me. I could feel her eyes. For a moment, she didn't speak, as if waiting for me to make the right decision on my own. Then she sighed.

“Time to get up,” she said.

She walked back to the kitchen with heavy footsteps and turned up the radio. She was listening to a talk show. I got up slowly, and began to get ready. As I adjusted my outfit and my makeup, she opened the door to my room and my bathroom several times, just to remind me to hurry. She made a million small maneuvers aimed at destroying my morning. Then, when it was time to go, and I'd ignored her final warning, she made a show of waiting no longer. While I sat in the bathroom with a congested makeup sponge, smoothing the surface of my face, she turned off all the lights and the heat, slammed the front door, got in the car, and started the engine. She issued a short honk — she was embarrassed to sound her car horn, even in traffic circumstances that necessitated its use.

I joined her a few minutes later.

“Sam,” she said, when I’d closed the car door. Ignoring her effort to begin a conversation, I buckled my seatbelt and turned on the radio. She immediately reached over and turned it off again.

“I’m at the end of my rope,” she said. “You treat me like I’m not even here. It’s worse than just being rude. It’s mean.”

As she made these claims her eyes began to shimmer. A curtain of tears dropped heavily over their surface and pooled in her bottom lashes. I had to ignore her ploys for sympathy, because they simply didn’t inspire any feeling from me. Actually they disgusted and embarrassed me.

I waited a few moments before turning the radio back on. She didn’t turn it off again.

While she drove, she held the steering wheel with both hands. She bit the skin inside her bottom lip, grinding her jaw in an ugly show of restraint, as though she was holding back a comment that would devastate me. But nothing she could have said would have had an impact. My mom was not a citizen of my world — she was so far removed that even her insults held no gravity; everything she said was completely irrelevant. Her compliments, irrelevant. Her criticisms, irrelevant. She was not a citizen, so her voice had no currency. As she stiffened against me, I matched her energy, I tried to absorb, multiply, and reflect it back to her. Because her energy was generated within her own field of logic and values, I knew that if I channeled it back at her, it would have upon her the exact effect she hoped it would have upon me.

The drive to school was literally silent, but symbolically charged. When she pulled up to the main entrance of school, it was as if we had spent the entire drive yelling at one another. For

her, my indifferent silence was worse than the cruelest insult. When I opened the door, she didn't even look at me to say goodbye, as if this would cause me some lasting harm.

It caused no lasting harm. In fact, the moment I was out of the car, my entire mood changed. It was as if I'd left my burden in the passenger seat with Mom. In retrospect, I probably did. I aggregated every frustration, pulled them together into one composite, and projected that upon her. She was the embodiment of my problems. I knew what I was doing, and that it was unfair. Still, I couldn't force myself to be more generous. I tried. But everything she said made me more resolutely hostile toward her.

As soon as we were separate, and I was walking alone on school grounds, my perspective improved. I recovered immediately from a sort of altitude sickness that she inspired in me. I could see that the height from which I looked down upon my mom was imagined. In this new clarity, I allowed myself to regret my behavior towards her, and even to feel badly that she had to commute for another thirty minutes. She would be imprisoned for that time with the sour, oppressive silence that I had established in the car. Then, the simple idea of contrition being enough, I felt absolved. I didn't think of her again for the rest of the day. I walked around the side of the building and entered the courtyard.

Elle and I had developed another routine: each morning, we met at the flag pole. With Elle, the courtyard was manageable. Though I still perceived it as an arena for judgment, I now felt competitive. I sometimes even felt like a person with the authority to judge. We walked arm-in-arm into the school building when the bell rang, two in a mass, a mass made up of other pairs, comfortingly indistinct. The courtyard emptied. We were part of the emptying. We moved in this mass, which shifted shapes in order to fill each new space, thereby making every space



into an arena for judgment. We filed in through the doors and up the four flights of stairs, down the hall, past the bathroom — where I used to spend my mornings alone — and into the choir room.

We entered with authority: the choir room belonged to us. We felt pretty good everywhere, but here, we felt our best. We owned the space, and filled it immodestly. We walked in, still linked at the elbow, deeply involved in a harmonic line. As we sang, we simulated spontaneity, as if this was the first time we had worked out these harmonies. It wasn't. Our harmonizing became like a performative conversation, but it was a conversation we had been rehearsing in private. We never acknowledged that those hours passed in the Jetta were actually rehearsals — hours spent singing, working out the architecture of our chords and counterpoint, writing harmonic lines that didn't mirror the melody, but played with it, wrapped around the melody, sometimes masking it, and then clarifying into a crystalline unison, and running those unison lines so many times that our voices were singular. It was just our way of communicating. But when we had the opportunity to be overheard, our musical conversation became more urgent. Of course, the music was for us — for me and Elle. We sang for one another, and for the third presence in our friendship: a creative spirit that we made together. But it was delicious to be heard. It was legitimizing.

The bell sounded. Ms. Kox emerged from her office at the front of the choir room. She said that she would be teaching us a new vocal exercise. We were to build a complex, grating chord.

“To train your ear,” she said, “in the art of dissonance.”

Elle and I shared a look — the look of satisfaction when you have experienced unintentional clairvoyance. A pleasant warmth, the velvet of a justified ego. We were both recounting our practice of holding dissonant notes in the Jetta while parked outside the town cafe, the mall, our houses.

First, Ms. Kox divided the choir into sections, each section was comprised of no more than four voices. She commanded that each section must function as one voice. They must predict breath, and never allow their note to cease in order to take in a new breath. The note must always be sounding, it must not lack representation in the whole. It was the responsibility of each unit to ensure that the chord was full. Then, starting with the altos on the far left side, she began assigning notes. As she brought in each new section, she sang their note to them, and they conveyed it back to her. The tension built as she distributed notes down the line, ending with the highest sopranos. Elle and I, because we stood beside each other and the sections were divided vertically, were assigned different notes.

Ms. Kox built the chord, and then immediately cut us off. Then, starting very quietly, she brought us back in. Her hands were formed as if holding a small orb at her sternum. Gradually, she allowed this orb to expand, her hands expanding outward, in order to direct us to crescendo very patiently.

At the top of our crescendo, our grandest fortissimo, the room seemed to wave as if caught behind a heat haze. The resulting chord was so full, so lavish, that it seemed almost sinful; it was terrifying in its capacity. The chord could not possibly be made by us, it was living, it buzzed in our ears. It could not have been created. We must have found it, intact. Our jaws began to itch. We felt a numbness deep in our ear canals. Our eyes were stinging. The choir

looked possessed: each chorister turned her head left to right, synchronizing eye contact with the girls that flanked her. A shared disbelief in our ability to make such an animated sound. A sound that seemed to emote. We were giddy. We were cocky. This was *ours*.

While the rest of the choir shared the sound collectively, Elle and I stared solely at one another. Our dissonant notes ground against each other, swords. We had none of the disbelief on our faces. Only a knowing, familiar war in our eyes. We drilled into each other's minds. We were beyond this revelation.

We had not noticed when Ms. Kox lifted her hands to release the chord. Our voices remained, singled out, locked, a skinny remnant of the former sound. But we both heard, in that moment, a conversation that we'd been having for weeks. And everyone else heard it, too.

11.

I went with my mom to pick Keala up at her house, which was in a gated development up on the hill, on the other side of the main road which divided northside and southside. I preferred to stay the night at her place, because I loved housing developments. There were always other high schoolers around, and the houses were clean and new as a rule. I had the code to Keala's development, it was called Ruby Heights. I gave it to my mom, and she punched it in. The iron gate opened slowly. There was a big polished boulder beside it, on which the name "Ruby Heights" was carved, and the carved ruts of each letter were filled in a glassy red material that contained suspended air pockets, like hardened sap.

Keala's parents owned a big beige house with white trim. The carpets were beige, the walls white, and the fixtures were made of wood and stained dark brown. Their furniture was either upholstered in beige-colored suede, the shade of which changed when you ran your hand with or against the grain, or of dark-stained wood and glass. Every room was a play off the last, the biggest variation was in the dining area: there, the floor was done in dark wood, and the walls painted beige. Each aspect seemed to be in keeping with the whole, and thematically regulated. Their back porch that was made out of composite decking, the corners of each plank were rounded off so that there were no sharp edges. That seemed to sum up life in a suburban housing development, to me. Everything was sanded down to a safer, more predictable version of reality, where you could prevent even the most mundane exposure to danger.

Keala was already waiting outside when we got there. She wore a pair of wide-legged stretch pants, a sweatshirt with our choir's logo printed on the front, and the pink sheepskin slides that I'd gotten her for Christmas the year prior. The next morning, we had to sing for the congregation at the Episcopal church where we held rehearsals for Dr. Dave's choir. Keala's mom played the piano for their own church, so it was a difficulty for her to get Keala to the Episcopal college's campus on Sunday mornings. Keala was allowed to stay the night with me on the nights before these obligatory services, because her mom trusted mine to make sure we got enough sleep to keep our voices healthy.

Keala and I sat in the backseat of the car. We stopped at a local pizza chain that was midway between Keala's house and mine, where my mom had already put in an order. We liked pepperoni with extra cheese and stuffed crust. Next door, there was a video rental store. I didn't have cable television, so we decided to pick up a DVD to watch. I let Keala choose.

Back at my house, my mom took a couple slices from the pizza and gave us the box, a bottle of ranch, a liter of Coke, and a roll of paper towels. We took it all downstairs to the rec room, which was where we always stayed the night. There was an L-shaped sofa, with a big matching ottoman that fit between the two arms of the sofa to make it into a giant rectangle. I put the pizza on the ottoman, opened the box, and poured a pool of ranch onto the cardboard. We both picked up a slice. She folded hers in half.

“So who ended up getting that solo you tried out for last month?” Keala asked.

I identified Keala’s asking of this question as premeditated, and intended to harm me. She knew that if I’d gotten the solo, I would have told her.

“If I’d gotten the solo, I would have told you,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Keala said. “You don’t tell me much anymore.”

I thought about that statement for a moment, focused my anger upon it, and imagined a hundred ways that I could twist the words to make her hurt. Then I gave it up. Keala’s offense was irrelevant. It held no currency.

“An alto named Carly got it.”

“I bet you deserved it,” Keala tried.

Without responding, I stood up, turned on the big box television that my mom and I had inherited from my grandmother when she died. I hit the power button on the DVD player, inserted the disc, and returned to my arm of the sofa with the remote. I pressed play and turned up the volume. Keala was staring at me. I propped my head with a couple of pillows, and situated them so that they created a wall between Keala and I.

I woke up in the middle of the night. I couldn't remember what had been happening in the movie when I fell asleep. Keala was curled against the seam of the sofa, her back to me, hunched like the hard shell of an insect. The television gave off a flashing glow, the title page rolled the same clip over and over. It lit her sleeping form, the open pizza box, with the ghost round of oil on the cardboard base. It took me a long time to fall back asleep. I watched the clip roll, listened to the repeated theme song as it faded in and out, the representative actions of the main characters featured in the clip. Thought of my own representative actions, if I were a character. What movements I would be trapped into making, again and again, in order to sum my personality up.

When I woke again, it was morning, and my mom was in the room, moving things around in order to make a disruption that would wake Keala and I. She ejected the disc, opened the rental case noisily, turned off the television and collected our greased box, making a face at the profane smear of ranch, which had shrunken against the cardboard and dried. I stretched, inadvertently knocking the remote to the ground, which woke Keala. Without acknowledging one another, we got up. I went upstairs to my room to change, my mother following me with our trash, and Keala got in the downstairs shower.

For our Sunday performances at the Episcopal church, we weren't required to dress as formally as we were for our ticketed performances. We didn't have to have our hair French braided, just tied back neatly, and off of our foreheads. Our informal uniform was comprised of a solid polo shirt with the choir's logo embroidered over the left side of the chest, a knee-length black skirt with a matronly flare, and a pair of plain black character shoes, round-toed with a modest and blocky heel. I detested the outfit, the skirt was hemmed awkwardly, exposing just the

hideous lower smile of the kneecap and my calves — my calves were my least favorite part of my whole body. They had no taper. The short heel made it worse, accentuating the length of my feet, without giving my ankle any benefit of lengthening. I felt the outfit made me appear plain in every way, unremarkable on the whole, if a little frumpy and unattractively proportioned. It defeminized every body type — which was probably the point.

Dressing took me no time at all, since I was not allowed to make any modifications to the outfit, so I spent most of the morning in the bathroom. I now had a reliable regime for applying my makeup, and went about it in a practiced way, it was a form of meditation. When I came out of the bathroom, Keala was eating pancakes, and my mom had put a few on a plate for me, which she now shoved into my hand.

“No time to eat these at the table,” she said. “You’ll have to take them in the car.”

I didn’t take the plate but moved backward a step. She almost dropped it on the ground.

“I need my music binder,” I explained, turning away.

“Your makeup looks nice,” Keala said. She put her plate in the dishwasher without rinsing off the syrup. I couldn’t tell if she was mocking me or trying to make up. I thanked her, got my binder, and then took the plate from my mom. She was still sanding where I left her, seething.

I liked to sing at the Episcopal services. There were men in braided ropes and heavy robes, silk sashes, they held wooden crosses before their hearts and looked upward, they walked in time down the church aisle. The church smelled of incense. We stood in the choir loft, and Dr. Dave stood before us on a wood platform. He conducted thoughtfully and with decisive gestures. The first song was a section of liturgical text arranged into a choral piece, and we came in

together in unison. The sound was ineffably pure, singular, there was no variation in its production — it all came from one crystalline source.

As we sang, something undid itself in my stomach, and like a string pulled loose from its knot, I felt myself fall straight. With no lingering trace of the former bind, I returned to my natural state of equilibrium. I scanned my conscience for residual guilt, shame, self-hate, and found it to be clear. I only had one desire at that moment that felt like sin: the desire to offer myself. But the offer would be upward. My chest was lightened, suspended by an unnamable force. God, or music.

My mom was an atheist and never took me to church, and everything that I knew of God I learned in choir. Most of the music I sang in Dr. Dave's choir and in my school choruses was religious repertoire, and often the performances took place in grand churches. I worried about the consequences of singing songs to God, in God's house, when I was technically an unbeliever. I didn't worship Him. I didn't know Him — I didn't care about Him — until moments like these. Until this moment.

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.* Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. The line began again, *Agnus Dei*, and I mouthed the words, removed my voice from the prayer, and felt my own empty mouth fill with the prayer of the sopranos beside me. Is it a sin, I wondered, to sing to God, not knowing God? To let music be God, or to know God only through music? To mistake knowing music for knowing God? *Agnus Dei*, I joined the voices once more, to test it — to see if there was a difference of feeling when I offered my voice, *qui tollis peccata mundi*, and here, the final line of the song, the repeated lyric featured a variation in the final clause: *dona nobis pacem*. Grant us peace.



*Pacem* was extended over many measures, whole notes tied over bars, and we all took turns breathing so that the note was uninterrupted. Dr. Dave directed us to decrescendo; our sound became a stalk of dandelion seed, lifting translucently. A few voices over from me, Keala watched Dr. Dave's hands, her expression forthcoming and sweet, like a lamb's, her commercially pretty face. She went to church every Sunday. Her "a" vowel, of *pacem*, was long, correct. Dr. Dave directed us to the second syllable, we emitted a crisp "ch" in unison and held the "eh" of *cem*. I wished that I could share this moment of supreme inculpability with Elle. I fantasized momentarily about asking her to audition. Then I decided that I couldn't bear the slight against her, should Dr. Dave deem her voice too unmatched, too bold, for the refined sound of his choir. This was mine, anyway. If I let her in here, she would take it away from me. If she came to know this part of me, she could make it a weapon.

Here, Dr. Dave cut us off, the tips of his fingers touching down on an invisible surface before his body, and then lifting upward like hot steam. We closed our mouths over the word, over peace, pressing it into our bodies with a resonant "m" that vibrated in the cavity of the vaulted church.

12.

Elle forged her father's signature at the top of her algebra test. It was her second test of the year, second failing grade, and her second time taking Algebra — she had failed the course

her sophomore year and had to repeat it. His signature was easy to imitate, vertical and businesslike, written with a heavy hand. He signed only his first name: Rich.

I hated math, but I was good at it. Almost against my own will, I found the material easy and comforting, in my head I was able to achieve complicated calculations, and I felt relaxed by the resolution of a mathematical problem. I passed every exam easily, usually without studying at all. While Elle was repeating Algebra in her junior year, I was in Honors Algebra, and would take Pre-Calculus the following year, and finish AP Calculus in my senior year. If I passed my AP exam with high marks, I could avoid taking more math courses in college — even the planning of my course of study was an act of calculation.

I hated math not for traditional reasons, but because it seemed that by having an affinity for it, I cut myself off from social progress. Granted, those who are bad at math always need someone in their life who is good at math. This gave me some leverage. But it also made me a token. Having talent in a field that is universally despised put me on the outside in a fundamental sense. I offered my help to anyone that would take it — let them copy off my homework, texted them answers to test questions. Giving away my work, the intent being to trade what I had in exchange for friendship, didn't get me the intended results. They never rejected my offers, but having made them rendered me pathetic in some way, and I ended up feeling like I'd been tricked into committing bribery.

Elle's attempt to hide her failing mark on the algebra exam was largely symbolic; her father cared only the minimal amount about her scholastic progress. He said this over and over again, in different ways, often in my company.

“That bitch,” he said once, referring to the math teacher, “hasn’t been laid in a decade. She’s just taking it out on you.” This was just after Elle failed the first exam of the year. Rich signed the parent signature line at the top of the test dismissively and handed it back to Elle. Then he put an arm around my shoulders and said, “Don’t worry, Sam, you’ll fail at some point, too.”

Rich knew I was obsessed with getting good grades and that my mother was a slave to academia, she’d gone the distance in her schooling, had a doctorate, and worked in a college-run laboratory as a chemist. Rich had struggled through high school and hadn’t gone to college. He held a grudge against academia, it had failed him. Rich’s ability to make a life for himself and for his daughter had been in spite of this town’s shitty public schools, he had no one to thank there.

I thought he seemed almost proud of Elle’s failures, because they made her a more exact replica of him. He was obstinate, he found a backwards satisfaction in Elle’s inability to conquer the same forces that had prevailed over him. But that obstinance warred against a different type of pride. Elle was his only child, and the distillation of his movements through life, so every expectation and ambition was concentrated in her performance. In her, he expected nothing — the same as he expected from himself — but hoped for everything. He fixed his faith in Elle’s singing career. Her voice was her ticket. Her voice made her viable.

This time, identifying that Elle was on track to once again fail Algebra, the math teacher called Rich to demand that he start Elle with a tutor. He was compliant, but flexible: he told Elle she had to get a tutor, to appease the dry old bitch, but as long as she found one, he wouldn’t ask questions.

Elle didn't care if she passed math either; I cared more about her passing math than she or Rich did. She only started to think about her grade in Algebra because she was alarmed by how much I dwelled on it. I'd never been best friends with somebody who got Fs; it made me nervous. We agreed I would tutor her. But with Elle, tutoring wasn't a deal that we made where I gave her my knowledge and she gave me her friendship — instead, we agreed, it was a way to spend the maximum amount of time possible together. Plus, she wanted to do well, for me.

We decided to do the sessions at Elle's house. My mom would be sure to hold us accountable and drill us if we held them at mine, she wouldn't allow us any freedom or flexibility.

The first afternoon of our alleged tutoring started out the same as every other afternoon. We spent an hour singing in the practice rooms, went to the coffeeshop in town and drank iced lattes. Now that I had an ATM card, money was fake and inexhaustible, I went to the bank next to the cafe, and I pulled out twenties, one after another, and spent them all on lattes and snacks from the cold case. I never checked the balance. I hazily understood that this money was mine, this was where the birthday checks and prize dollars had been deposited over the years, and now I had the key. We stuck around the cafe for a while because lots of kids came through after school. After our iced lattes, we bought another drink called a Tahitian Sunrise, which was deep cherry red at the bottom and yellow at the top, made from flavored syrup and soda in a 24-ounce cup with ice. Then, a divergence from our normal routine — instead of dropping me off at home, Elle and I drove back to her house together to study Algebra.

Elle and her father lived in a permanent doublewide on an acre of land. Their rural neighborhood was on the edge of the town limits. It was thickly treed, and the sunlight was

hampered by firs; the house sat in shadows all day long. Rich was a skilled builder and had constructed a little run-in shed so that they could keep some animals on their property: a couple goats, from whose milk he made cheese, a few sheep, and some free-range chickens.

Rich mowed the lawn artfully, lines like a painter, around the base of an apple tree in their front yard. The grass was long, but still lined up from the last cut. No one had picked the apples, and so they'd dropped, browned. There were tons of them, they broke apart underfoot. They were small, laced with wormholes, and gave off a sharp scent when crushed; they'd turned, smelled alcoholic. I picked my way around them as well as I could. I didn't want the brown jam filling the honeycomb tread of my new Converse. On Elle's property, there were not just firs, but also trees that changed color, bigleaf maples. The leaves' edges burned yellow in fall, the yellow choked out the green, and the leaves matted the ground around the trunk. It was only an acre, but a wild acre, a show of extreme color, hot reds, hot yellows and black greens.

The front door of Elle's house was insubstantial, made of thin aluminum, easily dented. There were two rhododendron bushes on either side of the door, lewd pink flowers, their petals arching backward pornographically. The summer drought led to their autumn bloom. The door opened with a plastic white handle, you had to push a button to release the lock. Then the first thing you'd see through that open door was the entry wall, and on the entry wall there were six guns mounted up horizontally, long, lean, straight, pointing in at each other.

There were few decorations besides. Photos of Elle in cheap black wood frames, some taxidermied game, their animal eyes stilled and glassed, the shine of the overhead lights granting them a hint of life. Rich kept a sealed bottle of expensive whisky under a glass dome on top of the hutch in the dining room. He was saving it for Elle's twenty-first birthday; when she turned

twenty-one they'd open it and drink it together. The rest of her dad's liquor was on the top shelf of a cabinet beneath the kitchen island, easily accessible.

We let the door swing closed behind us, with a synthetic crash. On the couch, side by side, with our Algebra books in our laps. It was a collapsed couch, with dilapidated cushions that sunk into springs beneath our weight, covered in blue waffled cloth. Though the house was neat, it wasn't meticulously cared for like my own; you could tell if you slipped a hand down the cleft of the sofa cushions, lifted the corner of a rug. We had one hour until Rich got home from work. I opened my book to the chapter we were working on, and Elle got out her homework and a mechanical pencil.

"So, this part's easy," I said. I ran my finger along the skin of the page, tracing the lines of text, nodding — I understood it all perfectly — until I arrived at the first concept. "We're working with linear equations here," I continued. "In a linear equation the most important first step is the order of operations."

Elle slid down on the couch, propped her feet up on the coffee table and put the textbook on her stomach.

"You know the order of operations?" I asked.

"First you do some shit, then you do the rest of the shit."

"Exactly. Really elementary concept. PEMDAS — parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition and subtraction. You simplify as much as you can, leaving the letter, the variable, until you've simplified both sides of the equation as much as possible. Why don't you try this one."

I wrote out a simple equation,  $2(4x + 3) = 22$ . As I wrote the problem, I already knew the answer. I watched Elle as she tried to work through it.

“No, look,” I said. I took her pencil.

“Nah, fuck this.”

“No really — look.”

I simplified the problem slowly, writing large, clear figures. I arrived at the answer,  $x = 2$ . Elle nodded slowly. She slid the pencil from my grip and copied out what I had done, and then copied it once more, in fluid, childish handwriting. Then she put her notebook paper in the crack of the textbook, closed it, put it on the coffee table, and got up.

She walked to the kitchen island and crouched down at the cabinet. I heard a clink, she pulled from the shelf a bottle of Fireball, and poured a little for both of us. I’d never had a drink before.

“To Algebra,” Elle said, carrying the two glasses back to the table.

She passed one to me, and as I took it, tapped her own against the one I held, the one that was now mine, blessing the glass, blessing my first drink, and locking me into followthrough. I hadn’t told Elle that I’d never had a drink before — she handled the order of operations with such ease that I could only assume she’d been drinking for years.

I brought the glass to my lips, and the cinnamon whisky burned a hole in my tongue, my mouth flamed and then simmered pleasantly, this process continued, the roof of my mouth, the back of my throat, hollowing a channel through my body and landing with a warm glow in the center of me, then transferring that heat to my extremities, I felt the cinnamon whiskey in my fingertips, I felt it in my feet, I felt it between my eyes. I was a sunburst.

At that moment, the door opened.

The glow died, I sat bolt-straight, I hid the cup behind a leg of the coffee table. Elle laughed.

“Hey, Dad, I took a tiny bit of Fireball,” Elle said. “Sorry.”

Rich looked at us, shook his head.

“Long as you’re home,” he said.

Rich wasn’t tall, he was only an inch or two taller than me. His hair was feathered, longer in the back than the front, the color of hide. He wore Carhartts, work boots and a white tee. He liked to wear his shirts tight. They pulled across his chest, relaxed at the dimple of his sternum and hugged his belly, always taut from beer.

“Hi Rich,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Look at her,” he said, laughing. He took off his boots and left them by the door. Then he walked to the kitchen in his socks and crouched at the cabinet, pulled out a bottle of Jim Beam and poured some for himself. “She’s nervous I’ll tell her mom.”

I tried to laugh, but it caught behind a caramel curtain in the back of my throat. I thought at this point I should do something daring, in order to restore the balance of power. I picked up my glass and took another drink, it hissed through the cracks of my teeth, hollowed me, I’d never felt such space between my hard palate and the floor of my mouth. I could feel how resonant my voice would be, with this much space to ring.

Rich didn’t say anything, but looked at me smugly — (“Don’t worry, Sam, you’ll fail at some point, too”) — and then, approaching the couch, leaned toward me. His face was unshaven.



He clinked his glass against mine, and then stepped back, tipped himself into an armchair, and turned on the television.

13.

In the autumn, mornings felt bright in their crispness, but were dark, the blues a deep cornflower blue, the structures, both organic and manmade, were faceless black shapes, coming together in an abstract black skyline. I wore no jacket. I shivered stubbornly; a jacket would hide my outfit, and I had composed myself very carefully today. I wanted to be seen fully and immediately, as frequently as possible.

I wore a new pair of pants from Hollister, I'd gotten them on sale. They were unorthodox, probably why they hadn't sold — velour, and mustard yellow in color — with Hollister's signature pocket embroidery, done in gold stitching. With them, I wore a maroon turtleneck, form-fitting. I tucked it into the velour pants, so the line of my body drove straight out of the waistline of the pants, cruised the contours of my torso, of my breasts, right up to my neck, and the line of my jaw. I wore black eyeliner and black mascara on my lashes, on my feet I wore black peep toe wedges, my earrings were black clusters of beads. The earring fixtures were gold — like the stitching on the pockets of my pants.

Before, I would have stepped out of my mother's car, and hitting the asphalt with one heeled foot and then the other, would feel at once the crystallization of the gold fixtures, the gold stitching; the black beading, the black wedges; I would perhaps have felt the air hiss up my calf

like a warning, through the wide leg of my pants. But I felt good, so far. I took this as a promising sign. Perhaps because there was no one around to see me, yet — the school was empty, I had twenty minutes before the warning bell. Today our choir class would go off campus, and my mom dropped me off early in order to inform my second, third, and fourth period teachers of my excused absence. I'd forgotten to do so the day before.

After visiting my other teachers, I brought my breakfast sandwich and travel mug of coffee into the choir room to wait for the rest of the girls to arrive. Ms. Kox was there, and waved to me from her office. No one else had arrived yet. The room had sectional lighting, and only the lights on the far side of the room had been turned on. I took my seat in the front row, sliding my backpack beneath the chair, and unwrapped my sandwich.

It was a novelty to have the choir room to myself, a room that was always filled with sound and bodies, now dim, quiet. It felt as if I was backstage, waiting for a curtain to rise, and some burst of life to materialize around me.

I began to notice the room in a way I hadn't before. I had never looked closely at the shelving units that ran the length of two walls, there was a step ladder in the corner. The shelves were full of thin scores and books. There were large cards wedged at the beginning of a category, that read "Secular," "Folk," "Pop/Contemporary," among others; on the strip of shelving below the scores, the broad categories were further divided into more specific subsections with labels. The labels were printed on plastic strips by a label maker, some very specific, some simply categorized by language or era.

On the wall closest to me, there were columns of group photographs, matted, with a gold title plate affixed to the bottom of each frame. There was one photograph for every year, since

1990, when the Quarter Tones was established at our high school. Each photo was a portrait of that year's group; below the name and year, any awards the choir had been granted that year were also engraved. First Place, State Solo and Ensemble Contest; Second Place, Nationals. I found the photo from the year prior and examined the faces of the choristers. First Place, State Solo and Ensemble Contest. I knew they'd gone on to Nationals, but had not placed. Some of the singers I recognized as current members of the Quarter Tones. There were two singers to each voice part, and Ms. Kox tried to fill one spot with a senior and one with a junior, so that she wouldn't have to start with a completely new group every year. This was a way to establish a standard of discipline and sound that was consistent from year to year.

Auditions for the choir wouldn't be held until spring, but already, I thought about them all the time. I was nervous to audition, as usual because of my fear of singing alone, but also because I dreaded the competition. I wasn't just afraid that I might not stand up to it — I was also afraid of the division this would force into our soprano section as it stood.

The warning bell rang, and Ms. Kox slipped quietly out of her office and passed before me. She hesitated at the light switch, winced at me apologetically, and clicked on the remainder of the room lights. The overhead lights buzzed and then stilled, the room lost its former mysteriousness, and settled into its usual familiarity.

Girls began to stream into the classroom, among them Elle, who rushed to me and then stopped abruptly a few feet away, held one hand up to her heart and the other she lifted to her forehead, just the backs of her knuckles against her brow, and she made a show of buckling her knees and letting her gaze swoop skyward, as if she were going to faint.

“Damn, girl,” she said. With the hand that had just been against her forehead, she pointed at me, cutting the air vertically, in order to indicate head to toe, my entire body, with admiration.

I scoffed, and then lifted my hand below my chin, making a little platform out of the tops of my knuckles, and looked up and off to the side, pursing my lips in a coy smile.

“Who, me?” I said.

Elle shoved her pack under the chair beside me and sat down.

“Who else?” she said. She pinned my right shoulder back so that my body angled toward her, as if to get a better look at me. “You just did this to show me up for our performance today.”

“Yeah, as if I’m trying to win the attention of a bunch of 80-year-olds.”

“Whatever rocks your boat.”

“If anyone is going to seduce an old guy today, it’s you,” I said. Now, I took her right shoulder in my hand and pressed it back, forcing her to present her outfit to me. I was instantly suffused with pride, I’d been with her when she bought this, I had helped her choose it. She wore a long patterned wrap skirt, it tied above her left hip and opened in a slit, her slim thigh was visible. On top she wore a brown turtleneck, tight like mine. I indicated her turtleneck, and then my own. “Psychic,” I said.

“You just figured that out?”

The bell rang. Ms. Kox came before the class, and held her hands out wide in front of her. The class fell silent instantly. Then, with open palms, she made one opposing half-circle with each arm, to instruct us to rise. We rose.

She brought her pointer finger and thumb to either side of her mouth, puckered her lips, and with her lips loosened thus, she began to trill, letting the air come between the space of her

lips so her lips vibrated against each other, while demonstrating a scale of descending thirds. Then she brought her hands out in front of herself, hummed our starting note, and with her index fingers fanned just slightly upward, and the rest of her fingers subtly curled, and her thumbs arching gracefully, she indicated our breath. We began to trill in unison.

Ms. Kox led us through some more warm ups, a few percussive ones, some glissandos, and then she said it was time for us to get on the bus. We all got our backpacks and filed out into the hall, behind us, Ms. Kox turned off the lights and locked the door to the classroom.

At the retirement home, we would sing a few songs as a full group in the dining hall, and then split into small groups to wander the space and perform for individuals, especially those who were bedridden. We had a lineup of songs to choose from, and had been allowed to arrange ourselves into small groups. Most girls broke into groups with one of each voice part; naturally, Elle and I formed a duo. Though we were both sopranos, I knew the alto lines well enough to harmonize with her.

As the morning progressed, Elle and I grew tired of singing the same assigned songs over and over again, most of them were era-specific and felt cheesy. We had been working on a new jazz number in choir recently, and Elle and I were both inspired by it, and had been practicing it obsessively. I'd written my own harmony line to it; it had become our new staple to sing in the Jetta. On a whim, we decided we should sing that for the next person that we visited.

We walked through the hall, peering into doorways that were left open, until we came to the room of a very old woman. She was in bed, with a pale yellow blanket pulled up over her shoulders, at the hem of which was a strip of satin fabric. The blanket was eerily undisturbed, as if just a moment before, someone had aired it in the space above the old woman, and then let it

settle over her body. She was looking out of the window beside her bed, into the curated outdoor space behind the retirement home. It had turned into an overcast and drizzly day, typical for autumn in our town, and the sky was a sheet of white, no distinguishable clouds or variation in color or texture. There was a birdfeeder outside of her room, and intermittently, birds perched on the wooden pegs and bowed their heads into the well of seeds at their feet.

I rapped on the outside of her door, and her body jumped beneath its blanket. She looked to us, her eyebrows pressed together, her lower lip jammed up against her upper lip in a nervous frown. Her chin rippled with tension.

“Sorry ma’am,” I said, “we’re with the choir that is visiting today, and we were wondering if you wanted to hear a song.”

Her expression softened somewhat, she still appeared nervous, or worried. I noticed she wore meticulously applied lipstick, dark pink. On her bedside table there was a black and white photograph in a frame, two figures.

“I love your lipstick, by the way,” I said.

Like a lock undone, her eyebrows lifted simultaneously; she still looked nervous, but now also sweet, and pathetic. She nodded at us.

“Thank you, sorry,” she said. Her voice was chalky, and she seemed surprised by it.  
“Yes, please, girls.”

Elle threaded her arm through mine, and we stepped into the threshold of the room. It had a strong, clean smell; it was serene and bright inside. Elle played the starting note for the jazz standard on her pitch pipe, and we tipped our chins down, and then inhaled together, lifting our chins slightly, and came in at exactly the same time.

The song was low in both of our registers, but this lent a profound, chocolatey sound to our voices, which so often navigated only the highest lines. We came in together without harmony, and then split, our voices barely discernible because of the depth of them. I loved singing this song with Elle. The melody was distinct and unpredictable, spinning from major to minor with an indefinable turn of notes, it was hopeful, it was mournful, changing shapes within our voices as we relayed it. I could feel the effect of the song as we sang it. It resonated in the white-walled room, we sounded breathtakingly good, I thought, our voices seemed to melt into one another. We didn't look at all at the woman, but only at one another, so that we could read the cue for each breath and consonant and match them perfectly.

When we concluded the song, we smiled at each other, and then at the woman in her bed. She smiled weakly back at us, and then looked out the window, and began to cry very quietly, her body shuddering gently.

I had witnessed our music's profound effect: I saw she was moved. I felt obligated to ask if she was okay. I think I wanted to hear her tell us how beautiful our voices were together, I wanted her to put into words the way it made her feel.

"Yes, thank you, girls," she said. She took a ragged breath. Her face screwed up in a frown, not the same frown she'd given at our initial intrusion, but something more carnal and uncontrollable. "That's just a very sad song, is all."

My heart jerked up to my throat — I hadn't thought at all about what the song might mean to her, what effect the lyrics might have. I realized all of a sudden what a sad song it was, and how actually inappropriate it was for this setting. I hadn't considered the lyrics at all, in fact, the performance was solely for Elle and I, and our own aloneness in our experience of singing

the song, its lush harmonies, the strange turns of the melody, each of which was a type of victory for us. We had been completely absorbed with one another, with our singular sound. Now the lyrics came back to me, and I burned at the idea of her, a captive audience, forced into emotions that she didn't invite:

*The shadow of your smile, when you are gone,*

*Will color all my dreams and light the dawn.*

*Look into my eyes, my love, and see,*

*All the lovely things you are to me.*

14.

There was another morning of rain. The same steady, light rain that had been falling for a week now, which tapped the rooftops just to remind you it was there. As we were dismissed from school, it finally stopped, and outside everything hung languid, sated, saturated. Tree limbs shone and dripped, the trunk bark black. Rainwater slid from every edge. Mist lifted from the pavement. The air was clean and bright; for the first time in weeks, the clouds broke apart. On the windshield of the Jetta, errant raindrops caught and contained the new afternoon sunlight. We decided we would take advantage of the respite, and go on a bike ride — I had two mountain



bikes in my garage. We would bike to the park, find a dry picnic table, sit by the pond. That was the plan. Then, as we pulled into the driveway, Elle received a text.

She showed me the display screen on her flip phone, the time 2:45 above the medium *Text Message* above the sender's name. *Ryan*. As I read the screen, a feeling developed under my skin — a shiver of excitement, edged with the heat of anger, jealousy. I looked from the phone to her eyes. Black and charged. If I looked hard enough, it seemed I could almost make out my own in their reflection. We didn't speak, but at the same moment we opened our doors, both got out of the car and rushed into the house; we needed to think, we needed to recalibrate. We needed to get inside, into my room, to close the door, to end the school day and begin the rest of our lives.

Though I preferred Elle's house, which represented seclusion and freedom to me, she liked mine. Two storeys — this, she couldn't get over — two entire levels on which to exist. We both tacitly understood that my house was not an objectively "nice" house, like those in the gated developments. My mother had a well-paid job, but raised me alone; we were middle-class. A "nice" house, I thought, was something closer to Keala's. Ours was relatively large, but it was an older construction and falling apart. My mom had trouble keeping up with the cost and demand of repairs. We lived on a quiet tree-lined block near the downtown area. Every house was attractive on our street, but none of them grand — just neat, shuttered houses with well-kept yards.

Our house wasn't cold and sterile like Keala's, nor was it a strangely lonesome house like Elle's. It was warm, inviting, and clean. It had character; my mother decorated the house with contemporary art, she liked to buy pieces from young painters in the city every couple years, when she could afford the expenditure. The pottery she also collected from local artists, and the

furniture she had accumulated over the years at antiques auctions — all of it was mismatched but the items shared a thematic unity. If there was a color in a seat cushion, it was represented in some thread on the long, embroidered drapes, and in the drapes there was a pattern that was imitated on a throw rug, and the rug was of a texture that was doubled in a decorative pillow.

Though my mother didn't care at all about personal style and appearances, she had impeccable taste in interior design. Her house came together in such a way that you couldn't imagine it being anything other than what it was. You couldn't imagine anything that might be needed, or anything that could be sacrificed, in our house. But without fail, she'd find and place a new piece of art or furniture, and it was as if everything settled around it, space breathed open around it, and yet again you couldn't imagine the house having been any other way, you couldn't imagine it without that item.

I remember the first time I brought Elle to my house, how she ran her hand along the carved wooden banister, the raw stone counters. She took off her shoes and slid in her socks on the original wood floorboards, laid herself gingerly upon our bronze-colored sofa, stretched out, pressed her face into a plush cushion. She inhaled deeply. She surveyed the collections of sculptures, they lived in little villages together on the tops of dressers and shelves. My room, she said, was the best in the house. The closet, a work of art. She looked out my window, at the trees across the street, the beautiful little blue house that our neighbors lived in, down upon my mother's garden. Through her eyes, I was imbued with a new appreciation for my own home, its simplicity, the richness in its simplicity, the kind of home my mother had been able to construct on her own, the way that she kept that home.

"He wants us to come to his game today," Elle said.

We sat together on my twin bed. I looked out the window, Elle at her phone. The ivy had turned red, it made a lip of fire around the window frame. Below, my mother's geometrical garden, its colors deepened with rain. My mom planted her beds into patterns and shapes, each variety edged sharply against the next, a breathing puzzle. Nothing grew over its prescribed height in my mom's garden. No species shouldered its way into another species' territory. It was systematized; that painstaking precision was, though predictable, deeply satisfying. My mom and I were alike in this way. We liked systems, we liked organization.

The wet ice blue of juniper berries — the juniper bushes served as a hedge — the wet dense green of its slivered and lizard-skinned leaves. The wet mint green of lamb's ear, and the wet red of geraniums, deep like rubies but delicate as organs. Wet peach beards of snapdragon faces, drooping chins, frowning, fat lips. Deep wet gold of black-eyed susans, round black pupils bloating upward, shined as if tearful. Lobe-like abelias, their soft wet pinks. Wet fuchsia begonias. Each cordoned off, no ground cover between them — just an inch of deep, dark, vital dirt.

Once, in order to earn my allowance, my weekly chore had been to weed the garden beds. My mother had found me inept, and she tried to train me in the art of floral composition and care. She forced me to kneel beside her on a foam pad while she pointed to blossoms and shrubs, naming them, recounting their maintenance regime. Largely, I tuned her out. I never took to the work. I wasn't invested in the product like she was, so I was clumsy and took shortcuts. The only reason I did it at all was to earn my spending money. Eventually she took me off the job and reassigned me to cleaning the bathroom, a chore that was hard to mess up, indelicate.

“So?” Elle said. She continued to stare at her phone’s screen. Her thumbs hovered over the keypad. “What should I say?”

I looked away from the window, to my closet, and, pressing my hands against the mattress to lower my feet toward the ground slowly, I stood. I walked to my closet and began to thumb through outfits.

“Tell him we’ll go,” I said.

“You want to?”

I knew Ryan had texted her — her, singular. Not us.

“Yeah, let’s go to the game,” I said, making a show of being bored by her interrogation.

Not that I’d ever had the chance to choose what my type might be, but I did have one. Football boys. Well muscled, narcissistic, primordial, sporting. Elle had a type of her own: translucent, spidery, concave boys, ones who wore lip rings, with artificially colored hair that was parted on the far left and fell across their foreheads, long enough that they were constantly flipping their head in order to sweep the bangs from their eyes. They played guitar. They wore gauges in their ears, wide and hollow enough to stick a thumb through. That was Elle’s type.

At the mall two days prior, we met a couple boys — my type — football players from the northside high school. The two boys were named Ryan and Scotty. In every pair, unfailingly, there’s a hot one; Ryan was the hot one. He was tall, slim, with dark brown curly hair. His eyes were two different colors, one was deep blue, and the other green. Scotty was short, with short limbs and short hands and fingers, with a military-style haircut, broad shoulders and a broad face. He wasn’t ugly, but that was as much as I could say for him.

The four of us met in the arcade. After flirting cautiously for a few minutes, we decided to play an immersive virtual reality game, where we all sat together in a black-curtained pod and shot zombies with plastic rifles, lime green and hot pink. The boys won. Elle touched Ryan's arm with her fingertips, I watched her absently trace a design on the white, vein-laced underbelly of his forearm, and then, when he'd said something funny, clutch him like a rodent. It seemed her type had changed. The four of us swapped numbers.

"Anyway, he said he wanted both of us to come," Elle continued.

Of course Ryan had texted her, instead of me. In every pair, there's a hot one. I made this evaluation in part to protect myself, because there was still a corner of my mind in which I could imagine Ryan choosing me. But I preferred to expect disappointment, rather than get blindsided by it.

I began to pull items of clothing out of my closet. We would need something understated. I figured we were safest if we focused on impeccable makeup, and allowed our outfit to send the message that we weren't trying that hard. I chose a black fleece North Face zip-up for myself and a shrunken crewneck sweatshirt for Elle. She pulled on the sweatshirt wordlessly, and then wove her hair in a long braid over her left shoulder. The blonde strands threaded through the plait. She wore jeans, they were ripped through both knees. I pulled on a pair of jeans as well, dark wash with bright white stitching. They sat too low on my hips, as was the style. The fly was barely two inches long, made for some assless mannequin. I felt immobilized. I couldn't comfortably sit in them, because the upper band of my hips was exposed, and if I bent over, the jeans did not bend with me. My fat doubled over the waistband. A whale, I thought to myself. I angled my body as I looked in the mirror. I looked good, if I did not move, or breathe too expansively. The fleece

zip-up had an elastic band in the bottom hem, and was oversized. With the fleece, I could wear these jeans. It concealed my whalish midsection.

We took the bikes out of the garage and rode in the direction of the town's football field, it wasn't far from my house. Both the northside and southside schools used the same stadium. The rivulets of water in the road zipped beneath our bike tires, tearing up either side of the rubber. Tulip trees lined my street, and their leaves were hot yellow, some brown, some fallen. My legs burned — I hadn't ridden my bike in at least a year, I could feel the pavement resist as I pumped the pedals.

By the time we arrived at the stadium, the game had started. We showed our student IDs to the man at the ticketing turnstile. He studied our pictures, the name of our associated school, and grinned up at us. He passed the cards back through the metal dish under his window.

"Rooting on the rivals, eh?" he said cheerfully. The northside team was playing against a high school from the next town over; it wasn't likely there would be many — if any — other students from the southside school in attendance. "Must be somebody special you're rooting for, then." At this, his cheerfulness took on a sinister aura, and his grin seemed to distort into a nasty curl. An innocent enough accusation, but I could read the subtext — he knew what high school girls, girls like us, wanted with football boys. We took our cards and slipped them back into our pockets, clicked through the turnstile, and entered the stadium.

"Home section is on this side," he called after us, "away on the other."

The bleachers were only filled in a cluster toward the front and middle, a huddle of students, mostly girls, wearing the team's colors — blue and silver. On the fray, there were some parents, teachers, community members. We found a spot toward the edge and sat down.

I didn't see Keala until the fourth quarter. She passed in front of us, dressed in a pair of blue, gray, and white camouflage pants and a sweatshirt with her school's mascot on the front. She was with two girls I knew from junior high. She didn't see us. When her back was to me, I saw that the sweatshirt was screen printed with a last name that was not her own. Although Keala and I continued to see each other at Dr. Dave's rehearsals two times a week and have dinner at a fast food restaurant afterward, we'd been engaged in an unspoken battle since our last sleepover. The objective was to reveal as little about our lives to one another as possible.

The normal thing to do would have been to call to her, to make myself known, to introduce her to Elle. Instead I looked quickly in another direction so that I wouldn't be seen. Whose name was that? Whose name was she wearing on her own body, as if a stamp of ownership, a label? And who had given her their name, implying that they wanted her to brand herself with it — to advertise it? They wanted her body associated with their being? The idea that Keala could have a boyfriend, both before me and without informing me, incited in me a feeling that extended beyond betrayal. I was immediately obsessed. The obsession manifested as a renewed sense of determination.

I believe that was the moment that I gave myself up to the fate of that afternoon, and saw the honest reality of how it would unfurl — not with the pleasant surprise of Ryan choosing me, but with the cold constant of disappointment — and how, I assumed, my entire friendship with Elle would unfurl. Okay, I thought. As long as I'm with Elle, I'm an accessory, I'm inferior, and my stock of hope that I'd been saving — that I might actually be her equal in social value and appearance — is laughable, and pathetic. It will never be my number that the boys we meet text, when given the choice between Elle and me.

And so I got honest with myself. I looked squarely at the glint of optimism I'd been harboring, and I eviscerated it. It would be better that way. Because even if Elle was always going to be the hot one, if I could stop being as choosy as I'd been, and settle with my lot, then I could change things for myself. If Keala was able to get a boyfriend in high school, I could too. I just needed to adjust my standards so they aligned with reality.

It wasn't a happy realization, but in the end, I was strangely relieved, as if I'd been resisting my natural role and was finally at peace with it. The feeling of parting your hair on the side for a lifetime before allowing it to fall naturally in a middle part. I settled into my skeleton, a shape I'd been resisting for as long as I could remember. I wanted to laugh, *New Sam*, as if there was ever any change I could have made to myself besides a change of association.

15.

We stood outside the stadium, leaning carefully against our bicycles, which leaned upon their kickstands. The sky had closed up again; above us a matte sheet of gray, depthless, but somehow appearing to descend and lengthen toward us. I had my left hand resting on the handle of my bike, and my right hand on the seat, with one leg crossed before the other, in an attempt to seem comfortable.

The concrete yard in front of the stadium had cleared out. A few parents hung around with paper bags from fast food restaurants. Some girls waited in pairs, their body language much like ours: wishing desperately not to look as though all they were doing was waiting for a boy,



though that was clearly the case. There was no other reason to linger outside of a stadium after a football game. The only pursuit could be interaction with a specific player, and as further condemnation, there was no shot of making that interaction appear to be chance. They knew, we knew, that we were waiting here for a reason. We were waiting for a charge, for a chance. Hoping to be noticed in a way that validated our existence. Hoping to be seen in a way that approved our bodies, and the tenuous sense of control we had over them. That justified our struggle. And when the subjects of our anticipation finally emerged, it was then within their power to judge whether or not our wait would be worthwhile. They could choose to approach us, or to ignore us. The decision that they reached was the decision with which we would comply; there was no other option.

Elle, to be fair, was more comfortable than I was. She spoke to me with ease, as though she could wait forever for what was next, and the mystery involved. She looked good in the simple outfit I had chosen for her. Natural. In the gray light, her skin was bright, even. Her whole presence exuded a peaceful indifference. Even standing before me, she seemed in repose, as if the atmosphere were supporting her posture, and all she had to do was exist within it. I couldn't understand how she appeared so placid and cool. Thus far, our interactions with boys had begun and ended at the point of introduction, and therefore had carried no threat of followthrough, no hazy expectations. In extending our relationship with Ryan and Scotty beyond that point, I felt we'd exited the territory of safe exploration — a territory which was, for me, still more exciting than anything I'd experienced before Elle. Even that had been outside of my comfort zone. I wasn't sure what the rules were from here on out. I wasn't sure how our unit — Elle and I —

existed when we were together, but divided, when new motives outside of our own friendship were introduced.

But prevailing over all of this was my renewed determination to exit that safe buffer that existed between what I knew and what I didn't know — so vanilla, juvenile. I'd been living in this soft place in which I wasn't forced to make decisions, and therefore didn't have to confront failure or success, the implications of that failure or success, the aftermath. Supposedly, Keala had successfully crossed through that transition period and into a phase of proficiency beyond my own.

The team began to exit the locker room. They emerged in pairs or groups of three, their hair wetted to their foreheads with sweat, they'd changed out of their uniforms and into logoed sweatsuits. Every player wore a dumb grin — they'd won their game — and flashed it generously, like a starlet exiting the stage door on opening night. They funneled toward the ticketing counter, clicked through the turnstiles, and were emitted to the outside world, where their status as a player on a winning team, despite what they did or didn't get done on the field, granted them an immediate ethos.

They seemed to me homogeneous. For a moment I feared that I wouldn't even recognize the boys we were waiting for. I couldn't judge what separated one from the next, what made this one better than the last. They all seemed the same to me, in a way that was at once a comfort and filled me with a dull dread. But of course, I recognized them immediately, when I saw them: Ryan and Scotty exited the locker room doors with another teammate. I couldn't judge the stranger's features from our distance, but could see that he was tall, even taller than Ryan, and all long muscle. As they walked, they scanned the premises and saw us. Ryan waved and then

turned to his teammate, the one we hadn't met, and clapped him on the back. A dismissal. Or a meaningful acknowledgement. I felt a twist of longing, of possibility for some different fate than Ryan and Scotty, as the stranger broke off toward the parking lot. And then it was just Ryan and Scotty, as it was fated to be. And as they came closer, I felt the space around me contract, I recognized the sensation of being cornered. But on every side, there was space. Beside me, a bike, which I could simply mount, which would convey me elsewhere. I'd made no promises. I'd shouldered no threats. The only person that was keeping me there was me.

They walked up to us, dropped their duffels on the pavement, and hugged us in turn. First Ryan hugged me, and then Elle; first Scotty hugged Elle, and then me. I wondered if they had planned this, planned where their embrace would land. Scotty lingered with his arms over my shoulders, wrapped behind my neck, so my chin was dipped down in the fleshy hollow of his collarbone. His scent had a stagnant, damp undercurrent, but was spiked with exertion. It was a sharp and foreign smell — I had the sense that from a foot away it would repulse me, but somehow, drawn so near to it, I found it attractive.

We decided to leave our bikes near the stadium, lock them up, and go together to Wendy's for dinner. Ryan's truck was in the parking lot, and he promised to bring us back to our bikes at the end of the evening. So now there was no bike on which I could simply leave; in Ryan's truck the space would be confined; and here was a promise, though it was not my own. I listened to the only remaining fact — that there were no threats, and that every choice I made was mine alone, and that I could reject anything I didn't want. I told myself this in order to console a suppressed sense of caution that I'd carried with me all my life. I had always been

careful and safe. I'd always listened to that voice. There were no threats — I shouldn't feel threatened. I should feel autonomous. I was free to make any decision I wanted.

Elle was walking a step ahead of me, and now paused a beat, reached back, and grabbed me around the wrist. She drove her nails into my skin lightly. She pulsed her grip, a playful squeeze. She often did things like this, performative actions to remind me that she was there, or that we were together. I never had to translate Elle's language, I understood it intuitively. But in this new context, I found myself trying to understand what she meant with this gesture: whether it was some feeling of excitement, or of nervousness, a performance of solidarity. From anyone else, anyone who wasn't Elle, I'd have felt it as exactly what I'd been dreading: a threat.

The boys sat in the front seat, and we sat in the back. When Ryan had turned onto the main road, out of the lot, Elle tapped my thigh with the back of her hand. I looked over at her. She pointed to Ryan and then fanned herself with her hand. Yes, I nodded. She raised her brows at me and pointed covertly to Scotty. Then she made a gesture with her palm exposed upward, as if to say *why not?* I shrugged, pressed my lips together in a passive smile. She pointed to Scotty again, and then, screwing her mouth up into a mocking twist, jamming her brows together — *are you fucking kidding?* — she fanned herself with her hand again. *He's hot, too.*

I got the point. She didn't want me to feel as if I'd gotten the bad end of the bargain here, though we both knew the reality, which was that Ryan was objectively attractive, and Scotty seemed dense and was shaped like a trunk. I ignored her, and leaned toward the front seat.

"When's your next game?" I asked.

“We play Auburn next Friday,” Scotty said. He pressed his elbow into the console and twisted his torso toward me. Then he looked over to Ryan and grinned. “It’s an away game though. Think you guys can bike down the freeway?”

“Elle has a car.”

“Who said we were coming, anyway?” Elle said. She slid toward the center seat, but didn’t lean forward, so her voice came from behind me. “We’re going to start to look like traitors if we end up at every northside game.”

“Fair enough,” Scotty said. “But you brought us good luck today.”

“Maybe other boys need some of our luck,” she said.

Ryan shot a glance over at Scotty. He was driving with just his left hand on top of the steering wheel, slumped a little in his seat, which had an exaggerated recline. Then, taking his eyes from the road, he turned around to make eye contact with Elle. She was smiling darkly, her arms folded over her chest, her legs crossed, no seatbelt on. I leaned away a little, with my back to the door, as if to make space for their interaction.

“Luck,” Ryan said — then he looked briefly back at the road, and again at Scotty, meaningfully — “We don’t need your luck.”

“Right, you think you can get lucky without my help?”

The boys looked at each other, busted up laughing, and then both of them turned to face out the windshield again, their bodies relaxed. Scotty had his left elbow propped on the center console, and stung Ryan with his fingertips. Ryan slapped away Scotty’s hand, laughing, and then sunk a punch into his friend’s thigh. He smiled absently. Scotty groaned, rubbed his quadricep; he smiled, too.

Had Elle just made a promise? Did that promise go for us both? I couldn't see how it was possible for me to retract a guarantee that I hadn't even made. I stared at her, but she continued to watch the road, her mouth held in the residual shadow of a smirk. I willed my eyes to penetrate, and opened myself to communication from Elle, psychically, as our communication often felt. I made myself receptive to her patterns of thought. But I received no change in psychic atmosphere. I was alone in my head, which was busy working out implications, and the symbolic reach of Elle's statement. She was over there thinking one thing, and I was over here thinking something else, and yet somehow when one of us spoke, we spoke for one another.

We ordered food, all of us burgers and fries. I hated red meat, but I didn't want to do anything aberrant, I preferred not to draw any attention to myself. The boys got a handful of packets of mayo, ketchup, and mustard, emptied them all onto the wax paper that lined their meal tray, and stirred their fries in the mixture. After I finished the burger, I felt immediately sick. Possibly from the weight of red meat, or from the culmination of our meal. Each time something ended meant something new, something outside of my territory of experience, was on the cusp of beginning.

We exited the restaurant in pairs now, Elle and Ryan in front, and Scotty and me behind. I watched as Elle and Ryan laced their fingers together. Scotty must have been watching this too. He didn't move to take my hand, but instead, without looking at me, he brought his arm around my waist. His fingertips were at the band of my jeans, and I became suddenly aware of their low rise, and compression against my hip, manipulation of my fat. I began to walk more stiffly, so that the jean material wouldn't press against and accentuate my softness. With the tips of his fingers, he lightly traced along my lower ribs, and despite myself, my body shivered with the

thrill. Then without lifting them from the surface of my body, he brought his fingertips to my spine, the fingers lined up vertically to match the verticality of my body, and his touch, so light it was almost the insinuation of a touch, moved up and down my vertebrae. Each knuckle of my spine he pressed lightly. His hand continued downward, and just above my ass, he applied light pressure. Instinctively my body gave to this. But my mouth had gone dry. He slid his hand into the back pocket of my jeans. He pressed his hand against my ass, which, with each step forward of the opposite leg, moved into the cup of his hand.

Elle and Ryan had gotten into the truck, which Ryan had backed into the parking spot, so I could see them together through the windshield as we approached. Elle was in the passenger seat, and Ryan in the driver's seat. I could see the shadows of their forms collaborating into one shape. Scotty, with the pressure of his hand in my pocket, guided me to the bed of the truck, where he lowered the tailgate. Wordlessly, he gripped my hips, he lifted me, I watched the muscles of his biceps define and stress against the fabric of his sweatshirt. He sat me on the tailgate. It was wet from rain. When was the last time I had been lifted — it made me feel small, it made me feel feminine. Now with his hands open on the top of my thighs, he ran his palms down, found the inner seam of my jeans, and traced it, opening my knees apart. He stepped forward into the space that he had created. He brought a hand behind my neck, and brought my face to his own. With his lips he opened mine.

His breath was hot, I could feel it in my own mouth, and felt the difference of his breath and my own. It was animal, his breath, hot meat. Immediately he filled my mouth with his tongue. I could feel, even in those early minutes of our kiss, the shadows of regret and shame closing in on my memory. Later I would imagine all the ways I could have resisted. He was my

first real kiss. Even now I feel his hands, my body's involuntary reaction, my body which knew only that it wanted touch, which was operating separate from my mind, which was pulsing: *not his touch, not his tongue*. His fat tongue, his hard hands. The band of my weight as it surrendered to the band of my jeans. He held that skin, he let gasp the elastic of my fleece sweatshirt, he found my breasts, lofty, central.

When it was over — and he had pulled his face away from mine, and my mouth now tasted of his breath — he lifted me from the tailgate, as if I were a child. We got into the backseat of the truck, and while Ryan drove us back to the stadium, he kept a hand on my thigh, and he traced the inner seam of my jeans. Each time he traced the seam, it was a more daring, more suggestive distance. I couldn't bring myself to move. I enjoyed the sensation of this risk, I loved the feeling of touch, and I didn't want it to end, though I also didn't want it to continue. It was better in the dark of the car, where his hand was a hand, and not Scotty.

The boys both got out of the car to hug us goodbye. First Scotty hugged Elle, and then me; Ryan hugged me, then Elle. The boys shared eye contact. Elle sought my eyes with her own. And then, as if we had all communicated something in that moment, each couple kissed deeply, and then the boys separated from us, held our hands until we lost the grip of their fingers, and got back into the truck. Ryan rolled down the window before they drove away. His elbow leaned upon the frame. He looked handsome in the orange cast of the streetlamps.

"There's a big party up on the hill after our game next weekend," he said.

"Maybe we'll come," Elle said. "If you're lucky."

"I'm feeling pretty lucky myself," Ryan said, laughing. He turned to Scotty, who was inscrutable in the dark. "How about you, Scotty, are you feeling lucky?"



I couldn't hear what he said. Ryan laughed, blew us a kiss, rolled up the window, and screeched out of the parking lot.

16.

"Today we dissect the Britten," Dr. Dave said. He held *A Ceremony of Carols* up in one hand, turning on his heel to show us all the cover, blue with three singing cherubs standing on a moss-covered stump and framed by a gilded moon. The trio of angels represented our three voice parts: soprano, second soprano, alto.

We opened our binders to the composition, and turned back the cover. The first movement of twelve, *Hodie Christus natus est*, was a processional. For our performance, we were to enter the concert hall as we sang. Each of us would carry a long white candle, which a volunteer parent would light for us just before our entrance. We would step in synchrony with the girl before us, leaving space for a person between. Half of the choir would enter down the left aisle, half down the right. The effect of this was an enveloping and ever-evolving train of sound. Just as the ear adjusted to the individual voice of one girl, that voice would be consumed by a new quality, and ultimately, coalesce into an ocean: each wave created some variation, but we came together as a single unified body. It helped that this first movement's dynamics were written something like a set of waves, surging in crescendo, subsiding in an immediate decrescendo, so the sound was always pulsing.

“Let’s run the *Hodie*,” Dr. Dave said, lowering the sheet music and opening it on his stand.

His wife, Dr. Eliza, sat at the piano just behind him, to the right, so that she could follow him as he conducted. The *Hodie* was all in unison. Perfect tuning was essential, but the line of distinction between a good performance of the Britten and an elite performance was in total uniformity. Uniform timing, precision, was very important — in our consonants, our vowel shapes. Purity and total oneness in our tone. The *Hodie* was written without time signature, so we had to watch Dr. Dave closely for our tempo. Sometimes he manipulated time with sweeping gestures, hustling us through a measure in order to create drama, slowing us in order to create suspense.

Dr. Dave nodded at Dr. Eliza, and she played the first chord of the optional accompaniment on the baby grand. The top of her chord was an A, our starting note. In concert, we would process unaccompanied. The only accompaniment for the entire composition would be a single harpist; her part began in the second movement. We’d been rehearsing Britten’s composition for over a month now. We had a solid grasp on the music melodically, and could sing straight through the 23-minute composition with relative accuracy. When we practiced music at this stage, somewhere in the gray area between sight-reading and performance-ready rehearsal, we raised a hand high in the air if we made a mistake. This let Dr. Dave know that we were aware we had messed up; he didn’t have to halt rehearsal in order to correct us. If someone made an error but did not raise their hand, Dr. Dave would isolate the voice part in which the error had taken place, and examine the infected area. Sometimes this meant investigating the source of the wound, if it didn’t heal itself. He ran down the line, made every vocalist sing the

measure alone, until he found the culprit. Usually the fear and adrenaline that this incited in each vocalist caused the mistake to resolve on its own: we all became hyper-aware of the music, at that point, and did everything possible to ensure we had it right before we were made to sing it out loud.

Now Dr. Dave turned to us, took a breath — we breathed with him — and then brought us in on our first line of the processional: *Hodie*, breath, *Christus natus est*. Breath, and now, more emphatically, *Hodie Salvator apparuit*. Today Christ is born, today the Savior has appeared. We were finding the emotional movement in the musical line, beginning to feel the wavelike swell of each measure of moving eighth notes. We knew the meaning of each word that we sang. Again, on the same melody of the first line, *Hodie*, today, *in terra canunt angeli*, the angels sing on earth; us. For the extra syllables, there were additional eighth notes. *Laetantur archangeli*. The archangels rejoice. The next line was a perfect evolution; instead of returning to the normal starting note of *Hodie*, the A, we progressed from the note on which we ended *archangeli*, a C. The line exulted upward, the sound exploding into octaves like a sun shearing through clouds. I felt truly angelic, on one long and expressive line, in seven eighth notes, *Hodie* — breath — and continuing, *exultant jusi!* Dr. Dave cut us off.

“Start over,” he said. “This time, on vowels only.”

We all exchanged glances, and then he lifted his hands, nodded to Dr. Eliza, and we began again.

*Oh-ee-eh, ee-ee-oo ah-oo-oo eh. Oh-ee-eh ah-ah-oh ah-ah-oo-ee*. The vowels merged together. This time he allowed us to reach the end of the movement, which was a vamp of

*Alleluia*, repeated as many times as it took us to reach the stage during our performance.

*Ah-eh-oo-ee-ah*. He cut us off after three repetitions.

“Start over,” he said. A few girls groaned. “This time, consonants only.”

An eerie vacuumed sound, which exposed rhythmic miscalculations. For every extended vowel sound, we were required to sub in a rest, and watch Dr. Dave, while also following our scores carefully so that we didn’t put a consonant on a beat early or late.

“And again,” Dr. Dave said. “Now on solfege, with hand signs.”

*Do-re-mi-mi, mi-re-mi-fa-mi re-do-mi-mi*. As we sang the solfege, we moved our hands into each assigned signal. The littler kids, who hadn’t yet sorted out the gestures, moved their hands around mechanically, like robots, attempting to maintain composure as Dr. Dave added new rings of fire to jump through. He repeated this regime for the second movement, *Wolcum be thou hevenè king*, and the third movement, *There is no rose of such vertu*, at which time, our hour of group rehearsal was spent and our brains fried.

“On Tuesday we’ll continue from movement four,” he said. “Fifteen minute break, and then to music theory. Younger choristers please have an older girl correct at least two pages of your theory book. Older girls, you must bring at least two pages to a director to correct by the end of the period.”

At this, we were dismissed to eat our snack. Keala left her chair in the second-soprano section and came to sit beside me. She pulled out a bag of purple grapes, some cut cheese and Ritz crackers. She wore the same sweatshirt I had seen her wearing a couple days before, at the football game.

I pulled my own snack out of my bag, a cheese stick, an apple, some chips. Both Keala's mother and my own packed these snacks for us every day that we had choir rehearsal. Keala held out her grapes and nodded at my apple, asking for a trade — I shook my head.

"How's choir going at school?" she asked.

"Good. We're singing some really complicated music for our Christmas concert," I said.

"Most of it's a capella. You?"

"Fine — nothing that exciting," she said.

"Well at least you have this choir," I said. "No one compares to Dr. Dave."

This was true, I felt it to be true in my heart. No matter how much I flaunted my school's choral program and boasted about Ms. Kox, there was no conductor as dedicated, as practiced, as Dr. Dave. Learning music with him was like doing a science experiment, but only he knew what would happen when the materials mixed. Even his body moved as if he was a conductive unit for the electricity of music, and it was sourced through him. It was hard to tell whether the music moved his hands or his hands moved the music. Dr. Dave didn't choose pieces of music that were as flashy and contemporary, like Ms. Kox did, but his attention to detail made our execution of simpler songs more masterful. The product, in my mind, was a purer expression of music, and of the heart.

I felt a warmth, thinking this, and the warmth extended to Keala, our friendship, our shared understanding of the true science and grace of well-studied music. She understood the patience with which a real musician had to approach a composition. The fact that every encounter with that composition might uncover a wholly new understanding, or a lack of understanding — that sometimes this meant beginning again, unlearning, and opening oneself up

to the song's will. Suddenly I missed Keala, though she was sitting right beside me. I missed her quiet companionship, our uninhibited strangeness and youthfulness together, I missed her comprehension of hard work and the rewards of intense study. I missed having her as my best friend.

After a few minutes of silence, I stopped eating and stared at her.

"What's up?" she asked, speaking slowly, with caution.

"Who's Johnson?"

Keala looked at me blankly. Then, registering, she gestured to the name on the back of her sweatshirt.

"Are you serious?"

I shrugged, but also nodded. She covered her mouth, stifling a laugh.

"Johnson like *Steph* Johnson, the alto from junior high. I stayed the night at her place last weekend and borrowed her sweatshirt."

Hearing this, I experienced a strange confluence of feelings: at first, I was relieved that she didn't have a boyfriend, she hadn't been hiding any serious step forward from me. Then I felt strangely jealous of her closeness with Steph, a girl we'd always been friends with in the context of school, but never outside of that. But the feeling I landed on was one of shame and regret. It hadn't been necessary, after all, for me to commit to that exchange with Scotty, and to the hazy promise of some future exchanges with him. I'd wanted to progress at the same rate as Keala, or more rapidly than her. I used her as a type of control group in order to measure my progress. I acknowledged then that it had never been necessary for me to subject myself to that evening with Scotty and Ryan at all, and yet that I'd felt somehow powerless over the situation, and fated to it.

I had done it for Elle. Now I missed Keala, who felt very far away, though she was sitting next to me, hiding nothing from me.

Dr. Dave clapped his hands in rhythm to get our attention, two quarter notes, two eighth notes, one quarter note. It was time, he said, for us to move on to our study of music theory. We pulled out our theory books and took our pencils from behind our ears. I was working on the Circle of Fifths, a puzzle of musical correlation that I couldn't keep straight. The choir fell silent, except the occasional tapping of a rhythm, humming of a melody, and also motionless, except for the strange and ghostly performance of girls tracing solfege signs in the air, hearing the associated notes in their minds.

17.

First, the auspicious sign — cars parked on the shoulder, between roadside and field, one after another. The train of them began out of nothing. Up on the hill, where town limits gave way to county deadzone, there were no streetlights. The cars were revealed to us only as our headlights caught the shine of bumpers, disclosing a secret artery, guaranteed to lead us, pulsing, to our destination. The pumpkin field beyond was vast and black, its horizon tipped in the glow of the distant downtown.

Then, the bodies, in silhouette. Tight bodies, young. Walking as if summoned, down the middle of the blackened county highway. Elle's headlights spotlighted them as we tailed, and they continued down the solid line without looking over their shoulders. Despite the established cold

of autumn, the girls had bare arms and wore brief shirts; the hem ended two, three inches before the waistband of their jeans. The line of their bodies suffered no interruption where skin met material. Just slim, straight lines. I could even see a lip of space, there, between hip and jean.

Elle stopped in the road. When she stopped, the range of her headlights became static, and the figures before us receded from the light, into the dark.

“Well, this must be it,” she said. She put her arm around my headrest, looked over her shoulder, and performed a three-point turn. Lurking in the opposite direction, we found the end of the line once more, and Elle maneuvered the Jetta into place behind the last car.

Before leaving, in our last solitary moment together, we pulled down our visors and opened our mirrors. The square of light beside the passenger mirror blanched my complexion. I touched lightly an imperfection beside my nose. I blinked my eyelashes against the edge of my pointer finger. I looked up, with the knife of my fingernail, I evened the bottom edge of my eyeliner. Then I made eye contact with my reflection, and tried to decide what to promise myself tonight.

Beside me, Elle removed her jacket. She wore a thin-strapped tank top. Then, from under her seat, she procured a water bottle, and unscrewed the lid. She took a long drink, grimaced as it went down. With her eyes pressed shut, she blindly passed it to me.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Liquid blanket.”

I took a drink. A long drink — I matched hers. I couldn’t tell the difference between liquors, but this one stung my nostrils, a clarifying rip through the very back of my head. And



then that descending, comforting warmth, a dizzying release from a pressure I hadn't identified. I took another, and then returned the bottle to Elle.

"Fucking beast," she said. "We should finish this before we walk in, so we aren't cold."

We passed the bottle four or five more times, until it was drained. Then we turned to one another, giddy now, flushed. *Liquid blanket*. I took off my own jacket and deposited it in the backseat. We evaluated one another, traded compliments. Then, after a moment of quiet resolution, we got out of the Jetta. I felt warm in the night, I carried my own heat.

As we started down the county road, another car pulled up behind the Jetta. I imagined us, receding from the spotlight of their headlights, imagined our bare arms, our bodies as seen from behind, and how we must have appeared as we walked resolutely out of the light and into the dark. Just as the girls before us. We were them, those girls. I felt the hem of my shirt; I felt, with heightened awareness, the outline of my body.

How many cars could we have passed? The chrome line, glancing in the moonlight, seemed to extend forever as we summited a modest hill, and forever on the other side. After walking awhile, the cold found a way to me, even through the liquor. The sound of the party distinguished itself: the low throb of a subwoofer, the rising scales of laughter. The harrowing sound of male voices in chorus, yelling something unidentifiable. Chanting. Equally alien, the sound of disembodied female voices, piercing in their higher frequency.

As we came closer, the setting sharpened. Voices came with bodies. There was a bonfire. Dark forms stood all around, dark structures, all backlit, and sparks flicked into the black sky, popping, sizzling, and then floating back to earth as dead white ash. Beneath a porch light, a circle of girls passed a plastic handle of brown liquor. In the dark of the front yard, there was a

disengaged wooden door propped on two sawhorses, on either end of the door a triangle of red plastic cups was set up in a game of beer pong. A group of people surrounded the makeshift table. People slipped by before and behind me, drunk, beautiful, shadowed. They disappeared behind black walls and black trees, emerged again beneath the glow of the porch light or around the edge of the fire. I felt my body pulled in every direction, up with the sparks, toward every person, toward Elle, downward.

Elle squeezed my arm and pointed to the far edge of the bonfire. Ryan and Scotty, each holding a red cup. Then, as quickly as she'd called my attention to them, she pulled me away, and out of the fire's illumination, toward two kegs.

A few boys stood around the kegs, pumping them, pouring beers, and refilling their own. As we approached, they took two fresh cups from a plastic sleeve, and before we could ask, had poured us each a beer. Elle took hers, and took a drink from it; some head from the beer traced her upper lip. She licked it off and laughed.

"Sam?"

A voice just behind me. I turned: it was a girl with whom I'd attended junior high and elementary school. Her name was Tess. Her hair was bleached blonde, she was tan and impeccably built, her body was totally firm, no give anywhere. She had dimples, so deep they formed a contour down each cheek when she smiled. Tess, even as a child, had the energy and presence of someone in another league. Some people are born with that fate; her face alone — perfect — fated her for greatness.

"*Sam*, holy shit," she said. "I *knew* you partied."

She hugged me quickly, and then pushed me back, as if to get a good look at me. She bounced on the balls of her feet, laughed, and passed me a Coke bottle — pressed it into my empty hand. In the other hand I held my red cup of beer.

“Have a drink,” she said. “My special sauce.”

Her left hand shadowed my right as I tilted my head back, bottle to my lips, and took a drink. She lightly encouraged the bottom of the bottle, tipping more of the brown liquid into my mouth. I had to swallow twice. It was effervescent and sugary, I felt the laceration of the alcohol, but could barely discern it from the sweetness of soda, the carbonation. Tess guided the bottle back down, screwed on the cap. Only then did she notice Elle, standing a foot behind me. I hoped that Elle hadn’t gleaned from our conversation the obvious: that Tess was surprised, and amused, to see me here. Tess offered the bottle to Elle, who took a swig, and then returned it to Tess and thanked her. Tess took a drink herself, and turned, smiling, and disappeared into the dark.

We threaded our way around bodies, angling to pass. I felt the skin of a girl’s back against the skin of my own abdomen. The cotton of a boy’s shirt brushed against the back of my arm. I met faces and recognized them, or else every face seemed recognizable; each seemed to twist before my eyes into one amalgamated face.

We found a sliding glass door and slipped inside. The house was mostly empty. The entire living room throbbed with the bassline coming through the speakers, set up to flank a mounted television. They vibrated against the wall, and stood at waist height. The carpet was beige, stained; there was a long dirty suede sofa covered in jackets and purses. Four or five couples danced, removed from the larger movement of the party. They were pressed up against

the walls. The girls' hair obscured their faces. They looked down, hands gripping their thighs. The boys behind them held their hips, handlebars. They steered, controlling the turning of the hips, the pressure of one body against the other. The girls wore mini skirts, and the skirts inched up; I could see the curve of ass, where it met zipper. Sometimes the boy would lift his girl's upper body from horizontal to vertical, bring her back to meet his chest, caress her collar bone, tilt her head back — it seemed to fall like a dead bloom on a stem. Her eyes, revealed, were colorless, extinguished by alcohol. He would find her lips, hold her neck in his hand like he might hold a glass from which he was taking a drink. With his fingertips, he angled her jaw, he breathed on her neck, he took her earlobe with his teeth, and then he pushed her back down, and she found her knees once more with her hands, and resumed her mechanical dance.

Across the expanse of the screen door, there were vertical blinds, white plastic strips that hung from an upper track and rocked from their connective joints. Some individual strips were dented and deformed. They tilted a little all the time, and never settled into stillness. The glass door was visible through the blinds, but in the glass, I could see only the inside reflected back at us. From outside, I knew, we were clearly visible — lit up like a stage.

"I'm not drunk enough to be inside this shithole," Elle said to me. She was watching the couples, their repetitive movements. The blinds continued to tilt, twist.

"Yeah, this place is sad," I said. "Let's go back outside."

"First," she said, indicating the red cup in my hand, which I hadn't touched, "chug."

We raised our cups, full of thin beer, and tapped the plastic edges together. My first. After a few long swallows, my throat seemed to close off, and the beer threatened to reverse its flow. I pushed through the sensation and finished it. The beer made me feel thick and slow, sick,

it tasted in the back of my throat like vomit, but seemed to be the key to unlocking a new level of experience. With the beer inside me I felt a chemical shift, and my whole body became velvety, movement became easier, everything seemed low pressure, and light sparkled in a new way, every source of light became a diamond, and gained a halo.

We refilled our beers at the keg and then went to the bonfire. I made to join Ryan and Scotty on the other side, but Elle stopped me.

“Let them come to us,” she said.

“It’ll look weird for us to be here without them; they invited us.”

“No, we’ll look like we’re our own people,” Elle slipped an arm through mine, “like we’re individuals, not things.”

“So I’ll just talk to you, like this,” I said, “and laugh like this,” I laughed, “and pretend I can’t see Scotty right over there.”

“Yes,” Elle said, pulling her arm out of mine, “like this.”

She dug her nails into my forearm, threw back her head, and released what began as a fake laugh, overloud, but then ended with authenticity. I caught her laughter, as I often did. Our performance — that we were oblivious to our surroundings — became the best joke we’d shared. It was funny because we were so tuned in to everything around us. We were overaware; even our attempt to look natural and happy was a calculation. At least for me. The collision of this performance with our reality, and the fact that Elle was in on it with me, laughing with me, made me feel freer than I ever had. I could use my gifts of calculation for my own advancement, and this was a power that I could harness, instead of a fault that would harness me.

Shadows, and then hands on our lower backs, brought us down from our private moment. We turned to find Ryan and Scotty, who had gravitated toward us, our energy. We didn't need them, even at the very party to which they'd invited us. Scotty's hand beneath the hem of my shirt. Scotty's hand traveling up, his fingers under the band of my bra. Conversation ceased to make sense to me, it existed around me on the edges of my awareness, like the silhouettes of people passing around me, people I might know. It became a low din, atmospheric. I felt only this hand, and my back; I felt my back for the first time because of Scotty's hand. I thought: I have a back. I have a body.

They were staring at me, waiting for my answer. I was taking short, constant sips from my red cup. I hadn't heard the question.

"Give us a second," Elle said. She pulled me away. Scotty's hand, down my back, as I was separated from his fingertips, as space opened between us. I needed to be careful — it was important, maybe imperative, that I never require that touch.

When we were a short distance from the boys, Elle said, "You don't have to if you don't want to. You could just come with us."

"Come with you," I said, trying to decode what had been said in my periphery, what I'd missed during that distorted moment in which I'd experienced only sensation, only the undercurrent of experience. "Come with you where? To do what?"

"The boys want to smoke," she said, she eyed me suspiciously, and then laughed, shook me gently by the arm, recognizing my drunkenness. "But we could hotbox," she said.

I stared at Elle until she explained. She always explained without waiting for me to ask, and I was grateful for that. She could intuit my blind spots. She didn't make me reveal them on my own.

"Everyone will smoke in a car, with the doors and windows shut, so the car will get smoky," she said. "You might get a little high, second-hand, but you won't have to smoke."

This was the first moment that I actively wondered who Elle was before me. The curiosity occurred to me almost as a shock. She'd lived a life before we met. It seemed to me that I hadn't, or that I hadn't lived any experience worth hiding. She knew everything about my life. I knew nothing about hers. I wanted to resent her for this, but I recognized my part — I'd never asked her any questions. I'd been protecting us. Elle wanted to be someone different with me, she wanted to start over with me. If these were the circumstances under which our friendship could thrive, why should I care? Elle was revealing to me the vocabulary of growing up. She seemed to be making adjustments to my course.

"I don't want to smoke," I said.

"You don't have to."

My hair had fallen over my shoulders. Elle swept it off of my collarbone, onto my back. Then, her face inscrutable in the shadows, she pulled me after her, toward the fire, and the boys.

Two other boys from the football team joined us. We filled our cups, and began to walk down the black county highway. All six of us took up the width of the road. I stopped every few feet to drink from my red cup. I had trouble multitasking — drinking and walking. Walking in general took effort. My feet didn't land intuitively, I had to think about the action. Scotty had fallen into place beside me, I noticed with some remove his comfort with my body, all the different ways he knew to hold it. Now he walked with an arm around my hips, with his fingers hooked in a belt loop. Each time I stopped, he stopped with me, and then set out with me, matching my step so that our bodies moved in harmony. I had the urge to trip him up, to see how well he could match my movement if I lurched here, jolted to a stop, ran ahead. But though the alcohol made me less inhibited, I was still me, still unchanged. I didn't have the confidence to indulge a whim. I kept myself contained.

I tried hard to walk straight, though my feet seemed to land unsteadily and in no preordained sequence. Scotty weaved with me. I was a little suspended, his fingers in my belt loop. I noticed I was leaning into the cradle of his arm, but I didn't change my weight to relieve him. Instead, I let my head fall onto his shoulder. Like a dead bloom on a stem. We followed, in reverse now, the line of cars. It seemed even longer in this direction. Within a few minutes, the boys had finished drinking their beers. They threw their empty cups into the pumpkin field. I watched the cups arc into the darkness and heard, but did not see, their soft landing.

"Wait a second," one of the guys said — one of the two that I didn't know. He was tall and broad, with fair hair and features, a flat face and wide-set eyes. His name, I learned later, was Carl. "Why are we walking all the way out to somebody's car?"

"We're hotboxing," Scotty said.



“I have weed and a pipe. We don’t need a car. We’re in the middle of nowhere, who’s looking for us?”

“True,” was all Scotty said in reply. That marked the end of the debate. Everyone stopped walking, and stepped off the road, to stand along the edge of the pumpkin field. I shot Elle a look, and she gave me a policing glare in return, and then softened as if to say *trust me*. Which I did.

Carl pulled a blue glass pipe out of his pocket, it fit in the dip of his palm. He nested it there, against the pad of his thumb, while he pressed weed into the bowl of the pipe. I watched his procedure. I was a step or two removed from the circle, and Elle was holding my hand loosely. Her other hand was laced with Ryan’s. Once Carl had finished packing the bowl, he lifted a lighter, flicking it until a flame opened, and then let the flame lick evenly across his tinder. It roasted — I could hear the leaves crack like a campfire. He inhaled deeply. His eyes crossed, he looked down his nose at the pipe. As I observed the scene, I felt like I was watching something dangerous. It made me feel guilty just to watch. I wasn’t sure at the time what weed really was, how to interpret the act of inhalation. All I could see was the blackened bud in the cup of Carl’s palm, and that blackness in his body. I watched his eager expression, anxious to get the fire inside of him, and thought: this is what danger looks like. This look of anticipation, this desire to char oneself, to consume fire.

Carl lit the bowl twice, inhaled deeply, held in the smoke, and then released it in a long, slow exhale. Then he passed it to the fourth teammate, whom I did not know. Next, it was passed to Ryan, and then to Elle. She brought the pipe to her lips — familiarly, I thought. She lowered her eyes. Her mascara was heavy, black. Then she turned to Ryan.

“Will you light it for me?”

He made a cup with one hand around the bowl of the pipe, with tenderness, as if he meant to shelter Elle. He brought the flame to the weed as she inhaled. She pulled away, turned over her shoulder, and coughed a few times, delicately. Then she returned to the pipe, nodded at Ryan, and took another hit.

I watched the flame as it stuttered in an updraft, which found its way through the seams of Ryan’s fingers. Elle’s face in the dim light was contoured by shadows. I saw in that moment what she might look like as a much older woman. I was the next in line, and I looked at Elle, feeling desperate. She needed to get me out of this. I was losing track of what I had agreed to do, and where I had decided to draw a line. I imagined my own face, earlier on this night, the rectangle of mirror in the Jetta’s visor. I’d wanted to make myself a promise — to hold myself to some standard, or to somehow distinguish myself from Elle. But I’d never promised myself anything in the end.

“Ryan,” Elle turned from me, still holding the pipe in one hand, and took hold of his arm with her other. “Will you light it for Sam? She’s never smoked before. Go easy.”

She turned back to me, nodded quickly and with resolve, as though we’d just made a deal. Her eyes spoke: *you’ll be fine*. Mine were colorless.

Ryan stepped in front of Elle, and brought the pipe to my lips, tenderly, as he had with Elle. Somehow, with me, it seemed to be a fatherly gesture, rather than a chivalrous one. He even lifted his other hand, the one which held the lighter, to my chin. He tilted my chin up just slightly. His hand was rough against the soft space where my jaw met my stem. My head felt heavy, as if it might drop again. Scotty’s fingers still through my belt loop. My form propped up

by two different men. Ryan made eye contact with me. His eyes: intense. Kind. His blue eye, his green eye. His lashes impressively thick. Light freckles over the bridge of his nose. He still had the fat of a child in his cheeks, but the line of a man in his nose, his jaw.

“Just inhale,” he said. His voice was comforting. He kept eye contact with me. I nodded my head slightly, and he lifted the lighter, flicked the igniter, so the flame stood between us. I saw it playing in the shine of his pupils. Then that sound — the cracking of a campfire. I inhaled, sharply at first. Immediately my lungs closed and rejected the smoke, I turned and burst into a fit of coughing. My head rang. Then I turned back, as Elle had done, and returned my lips to the pipe. This time I handled the smoke well. I felt it blacken the back of my throat. I imagined my voice. I felt its edges curl.

After Scotty had taken a couple hits, Carl emptied the fragile black coals against his palm and then opened his hand to the ground. He wiped his hand against his jeans before packing another bowl, depressing the green bud into the pipe with his thumb. We completed the circuit once more. Then we started on our way back to the party. Everybody was laughing in the darkness, and Scotty was supporting my body in a new way. Now his arm was over my shoulders, but his muscles were contracted in a manner that restricted my movement, rolling me in toward his chest, like he was about to cast me out in a twirl. I felt as though a screen had been pulled down in front of me, but didn’t feel much else. I had already forgotten why I’d been so strongly opposed to smoking weed. Now I didn’t care at all. I’d done it. I seemed better off for having done it: I was part of the group, instead of being othered by my vaguely constructed morals, based mostly off of what I’d been taught in school, what I’d been told by my mom.

The party was as we left it, but had devolved some. We passed a couple making out, they were lying in the tall grass, which arched limply around their combined form. A group had gathered around the outside of the sliding glass door, where the music was loudest. They were dancing, holding red cups up in the air like torches. We integrated ourselves into the circle of people standing around the bonfire, which was huge now, eating inorganic materials the kids threw in. Beer cans shrunk into themselves and blackened against the coals. One boy was melting the rubber of his shoe in the fire; the girl beside him screamed and tried to pull him away. Around the circle, people passed a plastic milk gallon. The contents were clear. It came to me, and Scotty tipped it up to my mouth, holding the bottom. I swallowed until he lowered it again.

“You can hold your liquor,” he said to me. His eyes were shining in the light of the flames.

I didn’t know how to respond. I couldn’t tell if he was making fun of me, or if he meant it, and admired me for my commitment. It occurred to me that, as a girl, my ability to drink in high volumes gave me a sort of currency, or a social superpower. I’d never been drunk before, and wasn’t sure what feeling I should be aiming for, or how to know when I should stop, when the feeling would be enough. I passed the jug to Ryan, who stood beside me.

“Thanks,” I said to Scotty. I immediately felt stupid for thanking him, but I didn’t know what else to say. “My only talent.”

Elle heard me say this, and slapped me playfully on my upper arm. I rubbed my bare skin.

“Not fucking true,” she said. She pointed at me, speaking to Scotty. “Sam’s a seriously talented singer.”

“Will you sing me a song?”

“No.”

“Come on,” Scotty said. “For me.”

For him? Elle smiled at me. “I’ll sing something with you,” she said.

Elle sang a note. She sustained it on a long vowel. I shook my head at her.

“I’m serious,” I said. “I don’t think I can sing right now. I feel too fucked up.”

She paused, she took a breath. She began again, on the same note, the same vowel. I noticed that she’d closed her eyes, and so had severed that line of communication. She took another breath, she sang the note again.

So I closed my own eyes. The world seemed to rush by before my lids. I saw the light streaking through the shell interior, the world in an apricot glow. I saw, or imagined, delicate red veins lacing across everything, like I’d captured my seen world in a net. And then — for it was more a feeling than a sound — I felt Elle’s voice. The quality of her voice existed in a more intuitive dimension. I can’t say I heard her singing, or even that I consciously chose to sing myself. It was muscle memory. The only way I knew that I was harmonizing with Elle was that I could feel the resonance in my head, a particular buzzing in the temples, and I recognized that sensation as harmony. I recognized the feeling of our sound. I felt it whenever we hit compatible notes.

As we sang, time disintegrated, and I forgot our particular placement within it. I was lost in the intoxication, and this privacy we’d carved out for ourselves. We traveled through music,

sometimes finding melodic themes that we'd established earlier. Rediscovering a theme in this way was like recognizing a familiar path, and choosing to turn down it.

When we opened our eyes again, we were alone. It seemed at that moment that all senses were not only restored, but heightened. Everything seemed loud and bright. There was the sharp metallic smell of burning aluminum. I could taste the sting of liquor in my mouth, and a more muted, stagnant taste; the taste of a stale washcloth. The aftertaste of weed, I remembered.

Scotty and Ryan had wandered off, leaving us to each other, and the party was beginning to disperse. We found them again by the keg, draining the final suds with some other guys from the team. Scotty seemed drunk now. He was grinning. I thought he looked stupid.

"You guys have pretty voices," Scotty said. He grabbed me roughly and kissed me on the lips, drove his tongue into my mouth. When he pulled back, and the skin above my upper lip was wet with his spit. I wanted to dry it with the back of my wrist, but I knew the gesture was too obvious. I stood dumbly, aware of my skin, his spit, my hands hanging down at my sides like deadweights. I took his cup of beer, not because I wanted it, but for something to do. At first he protested, and then let it slide from his grip.

"We were singing you a song, and you walked off," Elle said.

"It wasn't really a song," Scotty said. "There weren't words."

Ryan watched us over the keg while he talked to Carl. He was speaking in a low voice — I saw his lips moving, but couldn't hear what he said. When he approached us, I noticed that he, too, was drunker than I'd realized. His skin looked waxy; when he put his arm over Elle's shoulders it seemed in part for support.

"This party is dying," he said. "The boys want to get up to some shit."

“We’re going to the northside to toilet paper some houses,” Carl said.

“We want to hit our friend’s place because he didn’t come out tonight,” Ryan said. “He lives in Ruby Heights. Do either of you live there? We need the code.”

I hesitated, and at first I said nothing. But I only hesitated a moment.

“I have a friend who lives in Ruby Heights,” I said. “I have the code.”

A betrayal in one dimension inverts in another, and has the ability to present as the counterimage of betrayal. In this dimension, I was actually acting out of honesty and integrity. I had to honor what gave me value here, in this moment, and weigh that against the abstract value of a key that didn’t belong to me, but to which I’d been entrusted. All a key could do was open a lock. But beyond that gate lay that other dimension, the one in which I’d used a token of my friendship with Keala as a piece of currency here. I didn’t think of all that then, at the keg, in the night, feeling my skin, feeling the bodies moving around me, moving toward me. Right then I can’t say I was thinking of anything in a very deliberate way. I only registered the crucial fact — they wanted something, and I had it.

19.

Twice a year, once in early winter and once in the early spring, Dr. Dave took the whole choir up into the mountains for a retreat. The camp was two hours from town. No one else used the facilities while we were there, so the three hundred acres of woods belonged to us, the twelve cabins, though we could only fill four, the recreation room with its tired, bald pool table — all

ours. The main lodge had a mess hall with ten heavy wooden tables. Its ceiling was cathedral, rough exposed beams ran the length of the building, they were fixed with black iron plates. Concrete underfoot. In the center of the hall, there was a circular stone fireplace, which was no longer utilized for fires. Instead, the kitchen staff used the slate as a surface for bowls with oatmeal toppings in the morning, salad toppings at night. A wall of windows looked out over the lake, and in the lake there was a floating dock. We were only ever there during the off-season, so the buoys that demarcated the swimming area had been pulled and stored, the aluminum canoes flipped belly-up and locked in racks on the shore.

The winter retreat took place over a long weekend. We had a half-day of school on Friday and a national holiday on Monday. I'd brought my belongings with me to school. After early dismissal, I walked to the university, where there was a bus waiting for us. We were allowed to choose who we sat with. Keala was already on the bus, and had saved me the spot beside her. As soon as we set off, the younger choristers began a singing game. I put my headphones in and slouched in the pebbled-leather seats, propping my knees against the seatback before me. Keala was absorbed by the novel she was reading. I fell asleep and didn't wake until we had arrived.

It was always ten degrees colder there than in it was in town. You could feel it when the bus door folded open; the bus driver always seemed to open the door immediately, even before we were ready to disembark. Our stale air suddenly changed out for that cold mountain air. Dr. Dave stood at the front of the bus taking attendance, though there was no chance the number of singers had changed between the time we left and the time we arrived. He held a clear tub of



sheet music against his hip, supported the tub with one hand, and with the other, pointed vaguely at our heads while he counted.

We unloaded our overnight bags onto the pavement in the parking lot, a sheet of wet needles and pressed maple leaves, immature pine cones, matted and collaged, the color of rich honey. With my shoe, I scraped along the pavement, peeling back the rug of organic materials, and set my duffle on the exposed concrete. The camp was situated in a pit, on the valley flats around the lake. Surrounding us, there was a ring of peaks. Wherever there was shade, there were ranges of blue icy snow; in the shade of the curb there was snow, in the shade of a tree bough. It was freckled in mud kicked up from tires. The surrounding mountains were green on their exposed faces, and blue with snow in the shadows.

We had to participate in a stupid drill whenever we gathered. We split into our three age groups and were each assigned a number. In order to ensure that everyone was present, we called out our assigned number in chronological order. Dr. Eliza, who directed the older group when we were separated from the whole choir, instructed us to count off. Then we were to take our bags to our designated cabins and to report immediately to the mess hall for lunch.

Keala was beside me now, as we hiked up the cabin access road. She shouldered her oversized backpack and then bumped her hip against mine.

“Bunkmates?”

“I want top.”

We were in the fourth cabin, which had enough bunk beds to house all of the girls in the older choir. It was connected by a small common area to another living space, where our two chaperones — volunteer moms — would sleep.

“I want bottom anyway,” she said.

We picked our bed, beside a window, and farthest from the chaperones. I climbed the wooden ladder to the top bunk. The mattress was thin and hard, covered in thick vinyl. I unrolled my sleeping bag on top, put my pillow at the head, and descended. Keala had done the same, and had put her novel and a portable book lamp beside her pillow. We zipped up our overnight bags and slid them beneath the bed frame, and then walked down to the lodge in easy silence. We arrived before most of the other girls. Both of us poured ourselves a mug of hot chocolate, as was our tradition, and then mixed in flavor pods — Irish cream and vanilla. The metal dispenser of hot chocolate was always full, and beside it was another dispenser for hot water. The coffee they kept back in the kitchen, to discourage us from drinking it.

I loved choir retreats, in part because they were not optional, and under no circumstances — barring serious illness — could I miss a retreat. I always did better when I was working within defined parameters, I found myself moving and thinking more freely if I was limited in some way. Retreats were perfect, provided perfect boundaries, because retreats were nonnegotiable. If you skipped a retreat, you would miss too much — there would be no way to catch up. Our sound was irreversibly changed from the beginning of a retreat to the end. Missing that weekend would make you the residue of an old sound, an irrelevant sound, an unevolved one. Over the course of a retreat, we made remarkable progress as a choir. It was a pressure cooker for our collective voice and musicality. Music was first in our minds when we woke, and last when we slept, and it seemed we were learning and refining even in our dreams. We sang more than we spoke those weekends, and spoke hardly at all; we were preserving our voices for the next day. And because my time was not my own, I never had to deliberate over how to spend

it, or with whom it should be spent. The schedule was regimented and inflexible. Each day was consumed with rehearsal. What little time we had for recreation was also planned for us. We played organized games and participated in team-building activities, often they were musical games, musical activities.

After a late lunch, we had rehearsal for two hours, individual group rehearsals for one, and then an hour of recreation before dinner. For our recreational time, we split into age groups. The oldest choir met in the lodge, where there was a conference room at the far end of the mess hall. The room was carpeted, with broad windows that looked out into a stand of pines. The pines were curtains, and looking into them you only saw more pines. The land between trunks was bedded in fallen needles, and every space between two pines was a window to a pine beyond, so the woods appeared to go on endlessly.

There were stacks of plastic chairs in the room, and Dr. Eliza instructed us to take them down and to make a circle out of them. She pulled out a chair for herself, placed it with its back to the windows, sat, and crossed her legs. She wore dark blue jeans. We only ever saw Dr. Eliza in dress slacks with a hard crease, but here, at retreat, she wore blue jeans every day. She wore a pair of wool socks that came up over the cuff of the jeans. Her hiking boots were cracked at the toe, where her foot flexed in step, and the laces were tied in big, limp circles. The ends of the laces were coming apart. She was a tall and lean woman, and sat naturally as we were trained to sit — up straight and on the edge of her seat. Her face was always lifted in the manner in which we were instructed to hold our own faces, in anticipation of a breath. Her hair was white and short, her nails short, her fingers long, and her wedding ring a simple gold band.

The exercise in which we would participate tonight, she said, would be like a game of mind reading. It would test our chemistry as a group, and our ability to intuit one another's musical instincts. Intuition was crucial in order to elevate our sophistication as a unit. We needed to calibrate so accurately that the instincts of the girls around us began to bleed into our own instincts, until we can no longer distinguish between one's own instinct and the instinct of one's neighbor. Then we would be operating as one multi-valved instrument, a pipe organ, in which the quality of sound is consistent and seems to emanate from a single source, rather than an orchestra of many different instruments.

We would begin on *do*, on middle C, and one girl would sing the first note alone. Then another girl would sing *re*, the next note in the major scale, and we would continue in this way, until we got to the top of the octave. The exercise required that there be no direct communication about who would sing any given note, and if two girls came in on the same note, we would start again on *do*.

We got to *mi*, and had to start again; two girls sang *fa* simultaneously. The next round we made it only to *re*, and then once up to *fa*. We were attempting to make eye contact, but couldn't sort out how to make eye contact with every girl at once, to try to read her mind, to anticipate her moves. Instead we all ended up glaring in at the middle of the circle, some charged energetic core was building there. We became wary, and sang slowly, hesitated before singing the next note in the scale.

"Girls, stop being cautious," Dr. Eliza said. "It defeats the purpose. You must sing daringly, boldly, and with confidence. Otherwise it's just a waiting game, which anyone could play."

When we finally found our way to high *do*, the top of the octave, we were so excited that we screamed in chorus.

“And now, again,” Dr. Eliza said, “with eyes closed.”

The energy turned inward. The charge we had been building outside of our bodies, contained by the shape of our bodies in a circle, now came inside to occupy the individual. I focused my hearing so specifically upon the breath of the girls around me that I thought I could hear one alto thinking of a note, another soprano deciding to commit to singing *sol*. I tried energetically to transmit to the other girls which note I had chosen to sing, how I had chosen to contribute. And then I decided my contribution would be silence. We had to start four times before we made it through the octave. I didn’t sing at all, but only listened, my head full of voices.

In our cabin that night, Dr. Eliza came into our room when it was time to turn out the lights. Then she waited for us to slide into our sleeping bags, zip them, and to become still. As she did every night at each retreat, with every girl in the choir, she guided us through a meditative practice.

“Feel in the head a warmth,” she said. “It is shaped like a sun, an orb, but with undefined borders.”

I imagined this sun; I located it between my eyes.

“It is between your eyes. In the beginning, it is only a gentle warmth, as if I were resting the tip of my finger there, on your forehead. But the warmth, without pressure, begins to expand. Feel it in your left temple. And then, traveling over your brow, and to your right temple. Feel it

spread over the expanse of your right cheek, and blanket the walls of your nose, round the arch of your nose, and onto the expanse of your left cheek.”

I felt the warmth, its traverse across my face.

“Now feel your mouth. The dip of the bow in your lip. The border of your lip, and the curve of your bottom lip. The warmth in your mouth, across the plane of your teeth, in the space between your soft palate and your tongue, on the bed of your tongue, and the tip of your tongue against the back of your bottom teeth. Now release your tongue from your teeth; allow it to relax backward, and allow your jaw to relax downward, and allow space to open there, as the warmth spills from the part of your lips, descends around the line of your jaw, and the slope of your neck.”

I heard Dr. Eliza swallow. She inhaled deeply, as if she were about to sing. Her voice was next to music.

“Now the warmth is in your chest. It first moves right, along your collarbone, and into your shoulder. Feel your shoulder. And down the arm; feel your upper arm, your elbow, the inner soft of your elbow, your forearm, your wrist. Your thumb, your first finger, your second finger, your third finger, your fourth finger. Feel your whole hand ...”

I surfaced hours later to the rhythmic snoring of a chaperone in the room adjacent to ours. It was dark and quiet. I looked out the window and saw only black trees and hard blue sky, lent a subtle hue from the illumination of the moon, whose face must have been masked by the treetops. Across the sky, I saw a small, arrowlike form drop and sail. A moment later, a brother form, or perhaps the same one, drew a parabola over the blue. Bats. I watched two more, their movements quick and resolved, their bodies so slight that as they tilted in the sky, they seemed to

blink in and out of existence. Then I noticed the glare of light in my window, in the bottom half. The bunk bed was reflected in the glass, lit from indoors. Keala was reading. I wondered how long she'd been awake, or if she'd resisted Dr. Eliza's meditation, and stayed up so that she could read.

I felt very close to her; and of course I was — separated only by these planks of wood, this thin mattress. I felt close to her, because there was a certain comfort in her proximity, and in her simplicity. I hadn't told her yet about Scotty, the taste of his breath, and how it feels when the skin on a boy's palm is hard and thick from lifting weights, when the hardness of that skin rasps against the thin wrap of your ribcage. She didn't know that I'd found out one liquor can set your body on fire and another can shiver through your body like ice, but in the end, they all worked the same way.

We'd passed Keala's house that night, the night of the party. It was just the weekend prior to this one, but felt like a long time ago. We were in the Jetta. Elle was driving with her bare foot out the window and had one of her mixtapes turned up loud. Ryan was sitting crouched up on the console, I saw his hand slipped down the curve of Elle's right thigh. Another guy from the team sat in the passenger seat, and I was in the back, curled uncomfortably on Scotty's lap, with two other boys. The trunk was full of toilet paper, we'd picked it up at the Walmart near my house. We were headed for the other side of Ruby Heights, where their friend lived, with two cherry trees in his front yard. There, we'd unravel every roll of toilet paper, laughing drunkenly, throwing rolls over the tree boughs, over the chimney, until we saw the front door open. Then we'd run to the Jetta, our hearts beating wildly. We'd peel out. We'd escape. But before we got there — to those cherry trees, to that front door — we had passed Keala's house. I looked up at

her second-story window. It was late; two or three am. The development was dark. Every house was black. But in Keala's window, I saw a faint light was on.

20.

I heard my mom pull in, and the scrape of her key in the lock — she didn't know that I was home, and that the door was already open. I turned down the volume on the television and slid my algebra book onto my lap. I'd been slowly working through my homework. On the screen, a family drama played out in front of a live audience. It was a talk show that navigated volatile issues. The host was an empathetic, almost grandfatherly man. Without lifting my head, I looked up at the television — an attempt to appear as though I was focused on the textbook in my lap. I was inordinately curious about the fate of the couple on stage. The host held a folded piece of paper in his hands, and the camera focused on his face. The corners of his mouth were pulled down, which had the effect of pulling his whole face downward, drawing deep lines from the corners of his eyes down to the slope of his cheekbones, and then again from the edges of his nose to either side of his chin.

I'd learned that I could never predict the contents of that folded paper based upon the expression on the host's face. Often, he seemed deeply disturbed or disappointed, and then delivered a favorable verdict. Even if the verdict were favorable, I never understood how any couple could possibly come back from that — how they could regain dignity after exposing their basest insecurities on public television. The shot cut to the couple. They were sitting in straight



back chairs that were angled in toward each other. In the chair closest to the host, a woman sat with her hands in her lap and a disdainful look on her face. In the next chair sat her boyfriend, wounded, tortured. He leaned forward, his elbows propped on his knees, his head in his hands. Then the camera zoomed out, so we could watch both the host of the show, as he delivered the news, and the couple, as they reacted. It turned out that he was not the father. Hearing this, the woman rolled her eyes, and the man jumped up and rushed offstage, where he was followed, filmed, and projected on a screen out front. He was crying.

“How can you possibly be getting any work done while you’re watching this?” my mom asked.

I jumped a little upon hearing her voice — I wondered how long she’d been there.

“I’m not even watching, I just like some background noise.”

“Your pencil isn’t moving.”

I rolled my eyes. I thought of the woman in the show; she responded to the irrefutable proof of her own crime in the same way that I did. The hallmark gesture of indifference, which communicated no remorse, only contempt for her circumstances. I instinctively looked back at the screen to check on her progress. Though she’d seemed more annoyed by the paternity test than concerned about making reparations, I saw now that she’d given in to the audience’s expectations, and had gone after her boyfriend. Now she was backstage too, and was cradling her boyfriend’s head in her lap. He was saying that he’d raise the child as his own; that’s how much he loved her. Seemed she was going to get out of this unscathed.

“Mom,” I said, clicking off the television and finally turning to look at her. I’d forgotten that I needed to be on her good side, so she’d have no reason to refuse permission when I made

the following proposal — “Elle invited me and Keala to spend the night at her house; her friend India will be there too.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Sorry — were you telling me, or was there something you wanted to ask?”

I popped my knuckles, one at a time, and exhaled slowly through my nose. She knew exactly how to piss me off.

“Can I stay the night at Elle’s?”

“Will she be picking you up? And is her father home?”

Internally, I laughed at this question — it’s not as if her house were somehow more chaste and law-abiding while Rich was around. If anything, it seemed to me he almost stipulated his presence in order for us to engage in bad behavior.

“Keala is going to pick me up,” I said.

“So you’ve already made the plan, before you even asked me.”

“If I’m allowed to go, Keala will pick me up.”

“You haven’t been home for the past two weekends.”

“I know,” I softened, seeing that she, too, was softening. “It’s okay if you want me to stay here. I understand.”

The tactic I was taking now was of feigned negotiation. I could see that I had already won — I knew the fact Keala was going to be there made the plan more attractive to her. My mom liked Keala and the quality of our friendship, and since I’d met Elle, she made her opinion known that I was sidelining the better influence. But friendship is not a game of rhetoric, in

which one person compels another to compromise, to contort their own values and desires until they're unrecognizable. The attraction comes from an already visible common ground, a tangible sameness, the reflection of your own soul in another person — even if that reflection is distorted, faint. Perhaps the reflection we discern in another is an image we hadn't yet identified in ourselves. A reflection in which you recognize yourself not as the person you know now, but as a potential future arrangement. A friendship can unlock a new aspect of the self. In my friendships, I never felt influenced, or as if I were doing any influencing. Instead it always seemed as if a friendship produced a new and almost autonomous being. There was me, there was her, and then there was us. Our own individual values and tendencies were evident in our combined form, but ultimately, they existed beyond the self. No, I couldn't account for what we did; those were the movements of someone else entirely.

Though I was fighting my mom for permission, I wasn't completely at ease about the prospect of my night. It seemed like a messy combination of past, present, and future iterations of each person forced into one room together. Along with the presence of a whole spectrum of the self combined in each distinct individual, there was also the additional presence of every pair's combined form, the dynamics of each friendship, and those friendships' dynamics. The "us" of my friendship with Keala was radically different from the "us" of my friendship with Elle; I had no doubt the same went for her.

"You can go," my mom said. I almost regretted hearing it. "But please be home early tomorrow."

My mom came around to my side of the sofa and sat down. She leaned back gingerly, as if she were afraid of straining a muscle. As she reclined, her pencil skirt rode up on her legs,

stressed against the wider curve of her upper thigh. She wore thick nude nylons, she slipped her feet from a pair of leather loafers and stretched her toes. Then she indicated the remote, and I handed it to her. She turned the television back on. A new couple now sat on the stage; in this case, a woman suspected her husband was cheating on her; it was a lie detector test that was required. My mom pulled one of the knit throws over herself, tucked her feet up on the sofa cushion that separated me from her. She rested her head in the crook of her arm, which rested upon the arm of the couch.

In that moment, I wanted nothing more than for her to demand that I stay home, on the couch, with her. I wanted her to insist upon my presence. Just me, divorced from my relation to anyone else in the world. For my relation to her was a given; between us, there was no other. And though she'd never see me as I was with this friend, or with that friend, she would always be the only person who saw me as I was, stripped bare.

21.

The streets downtown were on a grid. The north-south streets were numbered. The east-west streets were named for trees or notable pioneers. The exception was our main street, the road which split town into northside and southside. That street was named Mountainview. It pointed straight to the base of our active volcano, in whose crosshairs we lived.

Ours is a town that was built in anticipation of its destruction. To live here, you have to give up your life to the mountain. The tribes that lived here before the wagon trains of 1850

called the mountain Mother, they lived in her foothills. The pioneers who displaced the tribes and platted the townsite were so resigned to the volcano, so intimidated by her stature, that they designed the town as a corridor. The main street was a grand entry. We provided her an access route, a clean lane for ruin, and in doing so, it was as if we expressed some solidarity with her. You're big, we said, you're dangerous; but we welcome you.

The town has lain in anticipation of her, crouched and submissive, as long as I remember. Still we wait for that final articulation of her potential. When she eventually does give, which she's guaranteed to do, we expect that her face will slide. The foothills at her feet will melt away from her, and hot mud will flow through our valley, down Mountainview, over our heads. As children we drew pictures of chimneys protruding from the mud, premonitions. Once a year, we conducted lahar drills, in which the students walked to local retirement homes and helped the elderly, in their wheelchairs, to higher ground. It was all a myth, to us kids — the possibility of our volcano erupting. The drills, the sirens. They were just the quirks and conspiracy theories of a self-involved valley town.

To our parents, though, the myths had weight. Our parents recalled to us the explosion of 1980. Their best ghost story, in which the world donned a veil of ash. It wasn't our volcano that erupted that year. It was the other one. Her northern flank collapsed, and in one day she lost over a thousand feet, and her stomach caved in. The cars were dusted in white, as if there had been a blizzard in May. For us, every day without ash was a disappointment. Another day that didn't live up to its potential for catastrophe. It didn't register that if our mountain chose to split, if the mud shivered down her spine, ripping and boiling the trees, dissolving the bones of animals, that mud would come to us hot, and it would not just be that our valley town was changed, it would

be that our valley town was gone. And we'd be gone, too. Unless you lived up in the hills or on the edge of town.

On the edge of the town's territory, the grid by which our streets were organized fell apart. Highways ran through and confused the neat logic. The land became more featured, and roads had to split off to get around a pond, or switchback up through the hills. I directed Keala down the dark network of these rural roads. She didn't drive much anyway, and never out here. When her parents let her borrow the family Volvo station wagon, she took it mostly from her development to the downtown area, or to the mall. She only took it places with lots or garages — she was terrified of parallel parking.

"She lives way out," Keala said. She leaned forward in the driver's seat, squinting at a street sign.

"Not this left, the next," I said.

We rolled down the road going under the speed limit. The lights of a pickup truck appeared in our mirrors. It came up quick and the driver blared the horn as he passed us. Two miniature confederate flags whipped behind the cab.

"*This* left, now," I said, as Keala overshot the turn and nearly missed it. "Come on, Grandma, get it together."

Keala looked at me dully — as if my act bored her — and then resumed her stance: leaning forward, hands gripping the top of the wheel, squinting at the black road. I wanted to tell her that narrowing her eyes wasn't going to make her see in the dark, or know her way around the countryside. But I didn't say anything until we were inching up on Elle's driveway.

"This is it," I said. I indicated the mailbox.

Keala seemed skeptical, but she made the turn. The property looked wan in the Volvo's headlights. It's true that autumn had turned, and the bigleaf maples that once flamed in Elle's front yard were limp, the leaves hanging brown or in a pulp on the ground, the rhododendron flowers had shriveled and were brown, the shrub's glossy leaves now drooped as if morose.

"I wish you could see it in the light," I said.

"Are you planning on kicking me out before daybreak?"

"Right, tomorrow," I laughed. "I forgot the sun would rise."

Keala pulled up behind the Jetta and parked. Before she turned the headlights out, we saw the curtain move in the living room, and two faces, Elle's, smiling, and another — placid. The curtain swayed back over the window, and a moment later, they both appeared at the door. It gave a tinny creak as Elle opened it for us.

India was petite, like Elle, but her face was the shape of a heart, and her cheeks were soft and dimpled. Her lips were also like a heart, red like one and bowed, and her eyes were large and darkly lined. The expression on her face was mild, as if amused. It never changed. As soon as we stepped in the house, Keala opened her backpack and pulled out a large mason jar, with gingham cloth ribboned over the lid.

"My mom made this chocolate chip cookie mix," she said. "She said we could have it if we want, all we have to do is add eggs and butter."

I felt as if Keala had punched me in the gut. I stared at her, I couldn't turn. I didn't want to see the look on Elle's face, or India's. I thought I heard them stifling laughter. In my head, again and again, I repeated the words *I am not you, I am not you*. She was a distinct person, and I was a distinct person, and her actions had no bearing upon my image. I was so marginally

associated with her that her actions seemed to be taking place not in my real life, but in some play, acted out before me.

But then Elle was laughing — she was jumping up and down — and she was embracing Keala. She took the jar from her hand and looked at it adoringly. Then she cradled it in her arms like a baby.

“This is literally the cutest thing I have ever seen,” she said to Keala, very sincerely.

India took the jar from her hands and examined the handwritten instructions pasted to the side. She nodded. I watched her smile; her teeth were jumbled. Her dimples deepened.

“This is insanely fucking cute,” she said. “Let’s make them right now.”

“My dad and I own chickens, so we have a million eggs in the fridge,” Elle said.

“They make goat cheese too,” India said. “I think it tastes like shit, but it’s pretty adorable that they make goat cheese.”

“My dad makes a ton of stuff, I’ll show you everything tomorrow. He made me a treehouse when I was a kid, it’s still there. He made applesauce last month from the apples that grew on our tree out front.”

I watched India and Elle, and the particular chemistry they had, and the energy of their friendship. It filled me with envy. Not necessarily envy of India — but more of Elle’s ability to give sufficient attention to multiple friendships, and to ensure their health. India was spending the entire weekend at Elle’s house. Her parents were away. She’d moved to the next town over last year, so she and Elle didn’t spend much time together anymore. When Elle told me that India would be at her house until Sunday night, I’d complained. I said something about two weekends without hanging out. This joint sleepover was Elle’s idea, her peace offering.



We made cookies together, ate half of them, and for something to do, we all straightened our hair and did our makeup in Elle's bathroom. It wasn't until after all that, when the night was beginning to lose momentum, that Elle ducked under the kitchen island to find the bottle of Fireball.

I knew the choreography as soon as she made these first steps — one hand gripping the edge of the island, one hand on the cupboard door. The slow drop onto her knees, as if she knelt in prayer, her toes tucked beneath her. She sat upon her heels. And as her face disappeared in the shadows of the cupboard, an ethereal clinking, like the handbells of a church choir. It was clear to me that Keala could not read the moment. Why should she be able to — how could she predict that any reading was required? Elle turned to face us, holding the Fireball before her like a sword, she was on bended knee. She looked more like a knight now than she did a devotee, there was nothing pious in her face, but something arch and twisted. I'm sure Elle knew, in retrospect, but at the time I trusted her. She must have known that Keala would be unaccustomed to this dance, but that she'd also be too starstruck to protest. Keala and I were much the same in that way. We could hash things out endlessly in hindsight, but in the moment, we were paralyzed by social codes.

Elle stood, and it was as if she issued a decree. She took out four glasses and filled them all halfway with Fireball. Now it was Keala's face I watched. She seemed to resist meeting my eyes. Instead, she looked to Elle with a growing understanding. I watched dawn draw across her face, a sun lifting in her eyes. I watched as her own body became unfamiliar to her, as she was suddenly aware of the way she stood. She shifted. Now she crossed her ribcage with one arm, as

if containing herself. She popped her hip out to one side, bent the opposite knee. She was beginning to understand how Elle was different from her.

India, on the other hand, looked pleased and content. She took two glasses from the counter and brought them over to Keala and me. Then she picked up a glass for herself, and we all gravitated in toward each other, to meet our amber glasses together in the middle. The sound was crystalline at first, a high sharp bell, and then it hollowed out. We brought our glasses to our lips; still, it was Keala's face I watched. She pressed her eyes shut. When the liquor hit her tongue, I saw her mouth expand, as if trying to make room for the heat. Her throat expanded. I thought I saw her esophagus contract, but then it relaxed; it, too, expanded. She opened her eyes again, the liquid dropping within her. And then she took another drink.

22.

It was after midnight. We'd moved on from Fireball. We'd been sitting on the carpet with our legs outstretched, our feet touching, to compose a four-point star of our bodies, so we could wrap our hands around one another's wrists and pull until we felt a deep stretch. We'd been dancing before the sliding glass door, a mirror in the dark, and imagining there were faces in the night, hiding behind the curtain of our reflection. We'd been singing three-part harmony, while India, who wasn't a musician, orbited around us on her toes, as if she were our moon. She wound her arms above herself as she revolved in tight circles, her face presenting to us, and then turning

away, presenting again, turning away. She was a moon, her face even looked like one, pale and wide, and the way it showed itself in revolution.

We'd had the rum, the tequila, the schnapps, the vodka — an equal amount of each, to keep the levels in each bottle congruent. The rum we'd liked best; coconut rum. We drank it and imagined the sensation of sun upon our faces. How long it had been since we'd seen the sun. Our town crouched beneath formless gray sheets three seasons a year. Keala said that she didn't feel well. Elle gave her two pink Tums. Now Elle measured out some Jim Beam, but not a lot. Her father drank Jim Beam, almost exclusively. He might get mad if we had too much. She had her face down at the level of the countertop, she was eyeing her pours. We all stood, watching, awaiting our dose. We were in the kitchen. They were watching Elle, but I was watching Keala. I noticed that she seemed to lose herself for a moment. Her body swayed, and then it surged, or reared, and then her shoulders caved forward, and yes, her esophagus expanded once more, and her jaw craned, and there were tears in her eyes. She was sick all over the tile floor. I saw the two pink Tums. And now her body bucked again, and finally we all seemed to wake up. I stepped on the outskirts of the flood, I pushed her forward to the kitchen sink. She almost slipped and fell, but made it there, and then supporting herself on the linoleum countertop, she was sick again in the sink.

While we cleaned up after her, we left Keala in the bathroom, arms thrown over the seat, face in the porcelain bowl. I heard her heave as I chased the vomit on the floor with paper towels.

"Jesus," Elle said. She was breathing exaggeratedly through her mouth.

“I don’t think she’s finished yet,” India said. She pulled the detachable nozzle from the kitchen faucet and sprayed slow circles around the basin of the sink. She aimed the stream at one corner of the sink, watched the hot water break apart the buildup, bore a hole in it, and then melt it down into the drain.

“Maybe you should take her home,” Elle said.

“And what? Tell her mom that I got her drunk?”

“She got herself drunk. She’s a big girl, she could have said no.”

“I don’t want to deal with her parents.”

“So instead you’re going to leave her in my bathroom all night?”

I realized that there would be no bouncing back from this tonight. We wouldn’t be able to return to the previous feeling, even if it was so close, separated from the present only by twenty minutes, only by this one act. I wanted to do what Elle wanted me to do, to remove myself and this problem — which I felt responsible for creating — from her consciousness. The sooner the problem was gone, resolved, the sooner we could move past it. Forget that it happened. That’s the real reason that I decided to take Keala home. It was less about helping one friend than it was about placating another.

The fact that I, too, had been drinking, and that it would be unsafe for me to drive, didn’t enter the conversation. The truth is that I felt sober. I felt almost more sober than I ever had — everything appeared in a harsher light, every feeling was inflamed, doubled in its effect. I later learned that this would be true of my entire relationship to drinking, that reality became too sharp when I was drunk, rather than softened, muted, which was the effect I was seeking. I seemed to

wake up from a numb state halfway through a party and see with grim lucidity the truth of my circumstances.

We helped Keala into the passenger side of the Volvo. She gave her limbs up to us, sliding heavily into the leather seat. Her chin dipped against her neck, and when she lifted her eyes, they were looking up at us from some other place. She made as if to get back out of the car, but it was easy enough to subdue her. I just folded her arms up, and Elle did her seatbelt. It was the only time I saw Elle buckle a seatbelt. Then Elle shoved a plastic bag between the passenger seat and the console, first checking its seams for holes and rips, in case Keala got sick on the way home. We shut the door, and Elle gave me a hug.

“Good luck with that,” she said. “Come back over when you drop her off.”

Saying that, easy and carefree like she did, made me want to hit her. I don’t know if I’d ever wanted to hit somebody before. Not that I recall. I wanted to slap her face, or hit her with my fist, though I couldn’t imagine how that would look, what steps I’d even need to take in order to make a fist of my hand, to make contact with her body, to retract my fist again, to leave. To imagine a mark, a mark I’d left. She knew I had no car. She knew I couldn’t just take Keala home, leave her alone, to sort through the contents of the night, to seek help on her own. To wake up and wonder how she’d ended up in these circumstances. I wanted to hurt Elle at that moment. Of course, I did nothing. I got in the driver’s seat, said goodbye to her and to India, and closed the door.

I put my arm around Keala’s headrest. She had her eyes pressed shut. I hoped they would stay that way. I watched Elle and India go back into the house, back through that aluminum door, as I reversed out of the driveway. Onto her dark quiet street, and right on the county highway,

through the dark network of country roads, passing no cars. Skirting the ponds, switchbacking down hills. We neared town. Streetlamps turned on as we passed beneath them. We made no conversation. Keala seemed to drift in and out of awareness; she continually cleared her throat as if to make sure I knew she was awake. We crossed the river, dark as sheetrock.

At Mountainview, I drove slowly. There were always cops on Mountainview. I watched the white lines, which dabbed down the road. I measured them like my pulse. The downtown area was brightly lit. I knew that at the immeasurable end of this road, our mountain rose up, forever out of reach. An optical illusion: though it felt as if I could meet her within minutes, it would take an hour just to sit at her feet. I knew she was there, but I couldn't see her. Most of the time she barbs the passing clouds, and they roll down over her body and stay like that, a wedding dress of waiting rain. Just knowing that she was there made me feel important. I was driving in the path of her eventual destruction. It could happen even now, I thought. Every day felt that way. *It could happen even now. It could happen even now.* And what would that life look like — was it romantic because the catastrophe would be out of my hands?

We lived in the shadow of something murderous. It required a certain disposition. I wonder now if our excitement, as kids, about the potential explosion, was the only way we could manage to go on living without living in fear. Like God. Our volcano was an institution; there was no chance of conquering her, no chance of changing your position in the hierarchy. The only option was to resign yourself to her. To live your life for her. To wait for her uncommon materialization. For the clouds to roll down and settle in a skirt around her hips, and expose her holy visage in the light, the sun catching on the snow, a sterile white, scored by ice blue features, impressions, hooks, eaves, scars, ridges, I imagined them like the many features of her bruised

and weathered body. A million expressions showed upon her face. From this perspective smiling, from that perspective winking, and then almost certainly crying.

I switched off the headlights a block away from Keala's house, and pulled into her driveway as quietly as I could. I turned off the engine. She was fully alert now, her face had hardened with understanding. I went to help her out of her side, but she pushed me away. We didn't speak. We both understood that we'd try to get into her house and go to bed without waking her parents, and field the questions in the morning. It wouldn't be so hard to explain away: we could say that the night was awkward, the dynamics were too weird. We could say that we'd left Elle's because her father never came home, and that we missed this house, the beige, the white, the edgeless composite deck.

We made no noise entering the house. We turned on no overhead lights. In the living room, we switched on a lamp, and I pulled spare blankets and pillows out of the chest. I made a bed for myself on the recliner, and a bed for Keala on the couch. She just watched me, shifting, stumbling every time she changed her stance. I found a large bowl in the kitchen and put it beside the sofa. I directed her to lie down.

We were only like that a moment, I hadn't yet switched off the lamp, when Keala began to gag again. Her mother appeared in silhouette. I was too tired to protest when she came around the recliner, too tired to stop her from lifting Keala's head — throat contracting, that dry, sick sob — and sitting down, resting her daughter's head down on her lap. I was drifting off now, watching as she stroked her daughter's hair, combed it behind her ear. She turned to me, then. I saw her face, distant as if I were down in a well, peering upward into the light. She was so close to me, but in a different place.

“What’s going on here?” she asked me. Her voice was not accusatory, but searching. She looked to me for honesty. That’s all she’d ever known to expect.

“I think it was the cookies,” I said. I hated myself for the lame and artless lie. “She ate a lot of raw dough.”

Her mother looked at me sadly. I was too tired to care. I fell asleep, and woke intermittently throughout the night. The lamp had been switched off. Every time I opened my eyes, I saw her sitting there, in shadow, upright, cradling her daughter. Something in this image, in the way that Keala had regressed on this night, a night on which she’d also grown up, reminded me of Elle’s earlier words. *She’s a big girl*, she’d said, *she could have said no*. I hadn’t made her do anything, I told myself. Friendship is not about influence. But even telling myself this, I recognized, with a certain cool distance, that I could identify the very moment that Keala had sought my pardon. She had been watching with fearful eyes the amber in the cup. It was so similar to that night two weeks before, when I had sought Elle’s pardon from the glass pipe, from the dense smoke.

23.

My peers often said to me: *only you could pull that off*. This was meant as a compliment. I tried to take it as such, but I read the double meaning. Whatever one wears, I said in response, one is *pulling off*. I said this to remind my peers that they, too, could dress boldly. This wasn’t counseling on my part. It was closer to pleading. I hoped that other people would wear



judiciously arranged clothing, like me. Then my tendency to overdress might be less circumspect. *Only you could pull that off*, they reminded me. I wondered what it meant.

An outfit is an idea; like all ideas, it is born of a spark. My outfits began with a central piece. That one item was the spark, the seed of the entire look. Every component of the outfit was a variation on an established theme. Like a central melody and a fugue, forever repeating, dismantling, evolving, working upon that melody. An outfit is a composition.

I wore a necklace. It was my centerpiece. The necklace was composed of a simple bronze chain, from which ten or so other chains dropped. Each branch bore a cluster of cyan and red rhinestones. The longest branch, which dropped from the very center of the original chain, disappeared into the shadow of my breasts. I could feel the terminal stone at the tip of that bronze line. The rest of my outfit was composed to coordinate with my necklace. I wore a red tank top, which was trimmed in lace both at the top and at the bottom hem. Over the red tank top, I wore an ivory tank top, patterned with alternating red and aquamarine flowers; the colors were muted. Finally, I wore a tailored navy corduroy jacket with embroidered patches. The patches were in all different colors, but there was one patch of cyan, and one patch of red, which united the jacket to the rest of my outfit. My jeans were gray — neutral; my shoes were red.

Elle wore a long peasant tunic with three-quarter-length sleeves. At the end of each sleeve were string ties, and at the end of each string there were two translucent beads. The tunic had an open neckline, and where the neckline opened there were two strings, at the end of each string two more translucent beads. Elle had tied the strings together to create an eyelet. The suggestion of her cleavage showed in the gap. The tunic I knew well; it was mine. It was off

white, and she wore it with a pair of dark jeans, which had broad off-white stitching down the inseam, and a pair of cheap faux-leather boots with a block heel in the same off-white.

Elle had adopted my brand, which legitimized it. When I was alone, I was an outlier; with two, we made a unit. We were in the choir room. The bell hadn't sounded. She sat beside me with one knee folded, her foot tucked up on the chair. It was fabulous, the way her slender limbs bent. She was like a child. I looked at that bent leg and thought it looked like a bent arm. I avoided looking at my own legs; I sat with them crossed at the knee. Instinctively I flexed them, as if this might change their size and shape. I told Elle that my tunic looked better on her than it did on me, which she rejected, even before I'd finished saying it.

Two nights had passed since the one at her house. The last time I'd seen her, she was withdrawing into the doublewide, passing through that aluminum door, her back to me. Her retreat felt symbolic at the time. It occurred to me that if we didn't discuss the night now, we never would. We weren't sure how to process it. To dwell upon it, to castigate ourselves, would mean a darkening in our tone. The only other options were to erase it, or to laugh about it. But we couldn't laugh. Who could laugh? We were too earnest.

I had woken up the next morning, a Saturday, curled against the wide armrest of the recliner, with my head in the crook of my arm. I faced Keala, who was sleeping on the couch. Her mouth was open, her breathing audible. She had her hands tucked beneath her chin. The bowl on the ground was empty. I could hear her mother moving through the adjoining kitchen, the sound of her slippers on the tile, the tines of a fork hissing against a steel bowl, whisking, the radio turned on very low — she always listened to the classical public radio station. I tried to will myself back to sleep, but I wasn't tired. I was anxious. Soon enough, her mom came to us. I

could hear her slippers on the tile, they got louder until she reached the threshold of the living room, when the flooring changed to carpet; then they were muted. She padded toward us. I looked to her cautiously, and she greeted me with a good morning, and then took Keala's shoulder and shook her gingerly awake. Pancakes, she said. They were ready in the kitchen.

Keala and I sat across from one another at the breakfast table. Her mom brought two plates. In the center of the table, there was a bowl of fresh berries, another with powdered sugar and a teaspoon, and a saucer with warm syrup. Both of us ate in silence. Her mother made incredible pancakes, cloudlike, with a brittle edge. Eating them made me feel like a good person. We were both grateful. We ate in silent gratitude. Behind Keala was a large window, I watched the robins pick through the wet grass in the fenced backyard. Her mother caught my gaze, she told me just a little while ago she'd seen a downy woodpecker, right there. She indicated a nearby tree. And then just ten minutes later, she told me, there had been a hairy woodpecker in the same tree. She looked at that tree lovingly. Then she looked at me, also lovingly — as if looking at me, she saw two species in the same order. It was clear that she had no interest in punishing or interrogating me. She never did end up telling my mom about that night, although I feared forever that she would, even past reason, after other eras of crime and heartbreak had come, gone, and fractured my relationship with my mother. I still feared my mom would find out about that one night. It was something about the implication: that I was the bad influence.

Keala's mother let her drive me back to my house that morning. On the way there, Keala asked me if we could forget about the night. She knew that neither of us would. Now, sitting beside Elle, I sensed the same plea — let's forget it, move on. Silence is always conscious; it is

the conscious acknowledgement of a visible fissure, for which we won't seek stitches. Let it heal on its own, everyone seemed to say, even if it heals up wrong.

The bell rang, and Ms. Kox emerged from her office. She didn't greet us, but immediately sat at her piano bench. She depressed the lowest key on the piano, an A. She also depressed the sustain pedal. Then she ran her fingertip along the face of every white key, as if wiping the dust from a window sill, still sitting on the sustain pedal, so that every note accumulated into a mass of sound. She released the final key, but kept her foot upon the pedal for a moment longer, before releasing that too. The sustain pedal hiccuped, and then just a ghost of the dischord remained. Out of the muted sound, Ms. Kox pulled one note — a middle C. She pressed the key with her right pointer finger, like a kid. Then she stood, still humming this note. She came to the middle of the room and lifted her arms. We all stood.

She demonstrated, from *do*, jumping the fifth to *sol*, followed by a glissando back to *do*. We repeated the vocalization back to her. We were well trained. Whatever she sang, we would sing back to her. First it was her voice alone, a single outlier, and then it was her voice, amplified thirty times its individual sound, a cohesive unit. We were her personal army. Our movements were her movements, reflected, augmented.

After she had run us through a number of exercises, she told us we would spend the remainder of our class period in sectionals. She delegated a sectional leader for each voice part. I was to lead the first sopranos. We were sent to the practice room off the hallway, the same practice room in which Elle and I first sang together. I turned on the lights and sat at the piano. The other sopranos arranged themselves around the room. Some sat on the ground, slouching

against the wall, others sat in the window wells. A couple girls leaned against the piano. Elle had one knee propped on the bench, she loomed over my shoulder.

We were working on an ancient English motet, *There is No Rose of Such Virtue*. I knew the lyrics; in Dr. Dave's choir we were practicing Britten's arrangement of the text. Britten completed his composition in 1942. The arrangement we were rehearsing for Ms. Kox's choir was not a contemporary setting of an ancient text, but the original music. It was written in the fifteenth century by an unknown composer on a scroll of parchment, along with twelve other carols. It's the earliest surviving example of English polyphonic music. *There is No Rose of Such Virtue* is macaronic, alternating between English and Latin, and is notated on five-line staves. They look just like the staves we know today, but the bars have no measures. All the notes are crammed together on the staff. It's busy, and would be illegible if the marks weren't so finely articulated. On the original manuscript, the music's written in mensural notation, an archaic system for denoting rhythmic values. The notes are diamond-shaped. The music we were practicing now, a girls choir in the Pacific Northwest, was the same as the music sung in the early 1400s in South Norfolk. The fifteenth century was no further away from me than my own mother's childhood, in my mind; anything before me was incomprehensible. But I knew that this was a type of time travel, this sound that we replicated, an estimation six centuries old.

Every voice part moved in counterpoint. When the sopranos held a note, the altos were running on eighth notes; every harmony was an act of division. This perpetual juggling emphasized the moments of synchronicity. Unison, in its rare instances, was a profound relief. All sound seemed to yield to that beat of agreement, all sound was swallowed inside its simplicity.

The sopranos watched me. They were waiting for a cue. I spread the sheet music before myself, and sat up straight on the piano bench. I laid out the first chord, every note of it, with my right hand on the keys of the piano. Then I lifted my left hand, and as I did, I felt a rush of inheritance. My hand was not my hand — it was Dr. Dave's, Dr. Eliza's, Ms. Kox's. I looked at my own hand. I saw the ligaments course the back of it; they stood, a tough string for each digit. My knuckles were wide, but my fingers were long, like a good conductor's fingers should be. They tapered to a point, each finger. Rather good conductor's hands, I imagined. Veins laced the back of my hand, some followed the length of a ligament and disappeared beneath the surface, some jumped over the rope of a ligament. And in my hand was a power endowed by those conductors, and a learned movement that they had passed on to me. I noticed that every girl in the practice room held her folder before her torso attentively, the way we were trained to hold our folders. One hand supported the spine, the other hand rested on the face of the sheet music, in readiness to turn the page, to mark a note in the score. And their binders were lifted in such a way that they could watch me and watch the music simultaneously.

When I lifted my hand just barely, tracing an imperceptible arc in the air, every girl took a breath, a simultaneous breath. I could evoke their breath. If I could have performed that movement again and again, I would have. *Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.* And always an inhale, always an act of anticipation. I was on the other end of that anticipation.

The sopranos began, in unison:

*There is no rose of such virtue*

*As is the rose that bare Jesu,*

*Alleluia.*

I cut them off. They were falling flat, I explained. Their sound was deflating as the line progressed.

“We need to lighten the sound,” I said. “It should be so delicate that it sounds as if we’re just touching down upon each note, before lifting off to the next.”

And then, surprising even myself, I demonstrated the phrase without deliberation. I heard my voice. Alone, and steady. In my voice there was a subtle shimmer, the beginnings of a vibrato — my vibrato — which I’d never heard before. It was pure, precise, and though our first line was mostly sustained notes, on the eighth notes my voice toggled between pitches with exact precision. Something had been changing within me, beyond even my own recognition. It must have been happening in those hours passed with Elle, singing in the full capacity of my own instrument.

Once I completed the line, *alleluia*, I lifted my hand in breath once more, and the room echoed back to me what I had just sung, a reflection, an augmentation of my own voice. My voice, amplified.

24.

There were three ways you could enter the park, and endless ways to get lost once you were in. It was eighty dense acres, dense but not wild, woods that felt like a forgotten room. The trees were dust gray, wildflowers like crumpled paper against the carpeted floor. Light coming through the canopy seemed hung up with particles, drifting grit in the sky, floating against the

sunlight like ash. If the light sheared through some branches and made a beam on an otherwise shadowed trail, that channel of light looked old, it looked like it was coming in through the filter of time. When I turned down a trail I got the feeling that nobody else had been there in a long time, but I felt the presence of that person from long ago. The network of trails was inscrutable as the crosshatches on a stranger's palm.

Now and then I came across a deep vein in the woods and I sensed that I knew it. I'd been there. A memory would hem in on my heart; I could feel the feelings I'd once had there, but I couldn't get at the edges of a real image. All through the wooded trails, every turn seemed familiar but not distinct — until I happened upon a familiar landmark. Then I was submersed in memory. There was the circle of tree stumps, the arched stone bridge, the wooden play structure, the caretaker's house. Those landmarks took on the quality of idols for me, because they contained so many vivid moments that they were like shards of my own mind. I never knew how to find them. Like all things in that park, I just happened upon them, the circle of tree stumps, the arched stone bridge; they seemed to appear when I needed a point of reference. Then it was like looking at an old photo and realizing that I'd taken it. It's an amazing thing to stumble across a fragment of your own self, out in the woods. There was something very special about the park: a park that contained me. But over the years, it saw too much of me — a whole life — and walking through it, I felt haunted by my own self.

The west entrance was unmarked. There was nowhere to park a car, just a wide inlet of grass off the road, overhung by branches. The branches threaded over each other and made a thatched roof of foliage. There was a square windowless structure on the lawn, a utility building. Kids used to tag the walls of the structure, until they built a chain link fence around it and



installed a security camera. That western trail was a secret portal out of the suburbs. Trees arched overhead. It came up behind the water tanks and let out by two of the larger recreation cabins in the park, which my mother had once rented for my birthday parties. Sometimes I'd find condoms in the fire pits. I remember removing one from the ashes with a stick, deflated and chalky, and asking my mom what it was.

Most people didn't use the east entrance. I guess it wasn't really a viable path to the park. You had to take the road on the west perimeter of a housing development and follow it for a while. That road hit a dead end, and another one broke off to the left and dipped down into the woods. A strange road. If you stayed on it long enough, you would find a cold, wet village. The houses were all ramblers with long front porches and skinny porch beams. None of them were painted, all of them the color of waterlogged wood. Driving down that road was driving into a different time. People sat in wicker chairs on the porches. They wore robes, they had sculptural hair, static and wild. They followed the movement of passing cars. I only went down there a couple times, to make sure it was real — even then, the place remained mythical. The rumor was that it was a psych ward, a branch off the nearby hospital. I later learned that it was an assisted living facility, a transitional house for those compromised by chronic psychiatric conditions, meant to assist in the transition between hospital and independent living.

Then there was the main entrance, on the south end of the park, and that's where Elle and I entered. The main entrance was the only one that was marked. It came off of a busy road, but disappeared into the woods quickly and completely. The road made a partial loop. To the left, you'd eventually reach the water tanks, the rec cabins. To the right, you'd pass the ballfields and the old reservoir, and then end up in the forest, where the road split frequently, and it was hard to

keep track of where you were. We had some time to kill before we were supposed to meet Demetri in the parking lot near the fields, so we went right; we would drive the eastern loop around the old Boy Scouts Camp and try not to get lost.

Elle turned up the track that was playing — recently we'd been listening to more popular rap artists. We stuck mostly to Lil Wayne, whose raps took on a melodic quality. His lines were not purely rhythmic, but holistically musical. We were able to write approximate chords to buffer the main line. We'd memorized the lyrics to many of his songs, and sang along in our incongruous harmonies.

Though it was crisp — early December — we had the windows down. I had a hand out, chasing the wind. *Don't play in her garden and don't smell her flower.* At a fork in the road just past the ballfields, we went left. On one side of the road there were picnic shelters, on the other side, the old fitness trail. We continued up until the road forked again, we decided to keep taking lefts, so we wouldn't get lost. This loop took us up above the play structure, into a narrow lot. There was a big pine with a hole in its trunk. The tree had always been there. I loved the way the bark folded over the wound; when I was a child I thought of that tree as a house for magical beings.

“I used to curl up and get inside that hole,” I said.

Elle put the car in park and got out. She left the driver's door open, so I could see from where I sat in the passenger's side, out through the open driver's side. Then she crouched down like I once did and tucked herself into the hole.

“I was probably about your size then,” I said.

Elle laughed and crawled out, she moved like a creature. She got back into the driver's seat, and then turned to me, her hair falling wildly over her face, her hands up like claws.

"Do I look like I'm from the woods?" she asked. "My hands are covered in sap."

Then she drove her sticky claws into my ribs, I was violently ticklish. I shoved her away.

"No, you look insane," I said.

"Same thing."

"Should I take you back to your porch, with the rest of them?"

She got a wild look in her eye. I feared for a moment that she was developing an idea. Demetri would be at the ballfields in twenty minutes. I told her so.

"Let's go down to the creek then, until it's time," she said.

We left the Jetta and scrambled down a steep path which led us to the old play structure. The creek ran alongside, and then disappeared into the forest. I remembered going to the creek as a child. In the summertime, day camp counselors coated small stones with metallic paint and put them in the water. We learned about sifting for gold, and practiced. My pants rolled up to the knee, my shoes on the bank, I bent over the reflective stream and scooped rocks into a colander.

When we got back to the parking lot at the fields, there was a blue Camry idling, facing the park. We couldn't see inside, but we knew it was Demetri. The windows had been tinted with an at-home kit. The edges were uneven. We pulled up alongside, and he rolled down his window; I watched the black glass slide away, revealing his profile. He barely looked over, just jerked his head to the right, *get in*.

Elle sat up front. She and Demetri had known each other for a long time, though Demetri didn't go to our school — I wasn't sure that he went to school at all. He couldn't have been

much older than us, but as he spoke he emphasized his freedom. He had an attractive face, long and brutal, with narrow green eyes and curls that lay close to his head. He had dark freckles on his cheekbones, but also a faded battlefield of acne scars. It was hard to tell them apart, I found his dappled cheeks compelling, a face like a mosaic. He seemed to find me compelling, too. He kept looking over his shoulder at me as he spoke, out the corner of those narrow eyes, and had a way of hanging onto his bottom lip with his teeth, as if he were trying to restrain himself. His interest thrilled me. But he was an enigma, and I was repulsed by the ambiguity of his lifestyle. After all, we were here to buy weed from him.

He jerked his chin upward, at the glovebox. We were driving now. I was keeping track of the turns he took. Sun skipped on the windshield, a perforated sheet of light, finding its chances between the leaves overhead. We passed the old reservoir. Elle reached for the glovebox, opened it. There was a large Ziploc sack inside, in which there were small bags of weed, pre-measured, in different sizes — dimes, dubs. The small bags sat on a bed of loose surplus, a large quantity of which lined the bottom of the Ziploc.

“What do you want?” he asked Elle.

“A dub.”

“Take one of those blue baggies.”

She broke the seal on the Ziploc, took out a blue bag, and then lifted her hips off the seat so she could retrieve the twenty in her back pocket. I’d taken it out of the ATM an hour before, between school and the park. I gave it to her; I didn’t want to make the deal.

“Now roll a joint,” he said, taking the twenty from Elle and folding it into his own pocket. “I’ll smoke you out.”

“I don’t have papers,” Elle said.

He dug around in his console, checked his pockets. He found no papers, so he pulled over and took an empty soda can out of the passenger seat footwell. He ripped off the tap. Then, with a pen, he punctured a hole in the top of the can, and another one on the side. He took the bag of weed out of Elle’s lap, and packed a bowl in the top hole. He offered greens to Elle.

Elle pressed her lips to the mouth. I thought of aluminum beer cans shrinking into a bonfire. Their black bodies compressing, curling into themselves. I imagined she was drinking from that can, its black walls. She lit the bowl, without asking for help this time, and then passed it to Demetri, who waved it off.

“Ladies first,” he said. Elle gave the can to me.

I took the can, the lighter, and flicked the metal wheel until I produced a spark and a flame. Then, mimicking what Elle had done, I stirred the flame over the weed. Through the can, the smoke felt like a hard slap in the back of my throat. I coughed a couple times, and then took another hit. I passed the can up to Demetri.

I’d only met Demetri a couple days before. He had been hanging around the courtyard after school let out, selling. When Elle saw him, she ran over, bringing me along by the arm — she introduced us. We made small talk and flirted for a while, and then he asked if we wanted to buy some weed. I was the one who said yes. He’d suggested that we meet somewhere else besides the school, so we could get high together.

The can made a couple more rounds, and now the interior of the car was heavy with white smoke. There was music playing. I hadn’t realized. I could feel the bass under my skin, the

sensation was like a space forming between my skin and my muscles, or my muscles and my bones. That new space sizzled. We were parked next to the exercise trail.

“Man, I miss having you around. We used to get up to so much shit,” Demetri said to Elle. He shook his head, remembering. “Has Sam met Chance yet?”

“No, fuck Chance,” Elle said.

“Come on, that kid is *still* in love with you.”

“Who’s Chance?” I interrupted.

Demetri put his fist to his mouth and let out an incredulous laugh.

“You haven’t told her about Chance?”

“Not much to tell,” Elle said.

“You girls should come through the house, the parties are even better now. Chance will get you fucked up. We could jam together. I got a new guitar.”

“Where is this house?” I asked.

“Chance and I live together with some other guys out in the hills,” he said.

Elle kicked her door open.

“I need out,” she said. “Let’s walk.”

Since we were parked beside the exercise trail, Elle started down the path. It was a component of the old Boy Scout Camp, a short loop, less than a mile in length, along which exercise suggestions were printed upon permanent signs. Moss singed the corners of the signs, now, and the accompanying props were quaint — blocks of wood upon which you were meant to sit and reach for your toes to achieve a hamstring stretch, wooden beams upon which you were meant to balance, bars at varying heights for chin-ups. Often the wood was too wet to sit or stand

upon, slick with mildew and fallen leaves. As a kid the stations seemed legitimate; they looked pathetic to me now. Demetri jumped for the highest bar and began to perform a sequence of pull-ups. He wore a thin hoodie. I saw the muscles of his upper back knit together as he lifted his chin above the bar.

That was when I saw her: on some distant stretch of the same trail, her sculptural white hair. It caught the slantwise light like a vision. At first I just stared. She was my private apparition in the woods. But then Elle followed my gaze, and caught sight of her, and at that moment she became not a spirit, not a mirage, but a person dressed in long pajamas. Elle screamed, took my hand; Demetri shouted and let go of the bar. The three of us, now overcome with hysterical laughter, ran down the path, back the way we came.

I was burdened with guilt as soon as we were out of the woods.

“It was just an old woman,” I said.

“Whatever,” Elle said. “She should have known that we were high out of our minds.”

Demetri offered to pack a last bowl to chill everybody out. He asked me to drive, so he could manage the weed. I got in, did a three-point turn, and headed back toward the ballfields. I remembered how many turns we’d taken. I took a left, I sensed that soon we’d come upon the old reservoir, and then I felt his hands upon my shoulders. His wrists were between the top of the driver’s seat and the bottom of the headrest, as if he were reaching through the bars of a cell. He began to knead the muscles of my neck.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just trying to chill everybody out,” he responded. “Just relax. Does this not feel good?”

I considered the question — I wanted to say no, it didn't feel good. But I was horrified to find myself captive. It did feel good. If he stopped, the pleasure would end. His thumbs made small circles, he traced those circles up around my shoulder blades, to my neck. Then he gripped my trapezius muscles, with his fingertips he dug against my clavicle. By the time I'd pulled into the parking lot again, he hadn't even prepared a bowl. He lifted his hands from my back, and I felt an intense lightness. I hadn't realized the weight of his pressure until I was released from it.

"Let me just pack this bowl quickly," he said.

"I think I'm good," I said.

Elle agreed — a relief. Before we left, Demetri gave us a pipe he fashioned out of aluminum foil, since we didn't own anything to smoke out of. I carefully put it in my pocket. We hugged Demetri goodbye. Elle nudged me.

"You owe him a kiss," she said, "for smoking us out."

I shot her a desperate glare.

She said nothing. She just laughed at my face and pulled me back to the Jetta. We got in and left, without doing our seatbelts, without another word to Demetri.

25.

I kept a spare mattress under my bed. It fit between the frame posts and was concealed by a bed skirt. When someone spent the night, I slid it out, and we slept alongside one another. Elle lay there now. My old comforter, flannel and printed with mauve roses, was pulled up to her chin. My mom kept our heater on a preprogrammed cycle. At night it turned off, and it didn't



kick back on until half past six in the morning. My alarm had just sounded, which meant it had just turned six. The coldest hour.

We'd hardly slept; in fact, I couldn't remember where we'd left off and finally succumbed. We'd talked into dreams. Now the early winter morning was a cold blue through my window. The only illumination came from a string of lights that were wound around my curtain rod. We'd left them plugged in through the night. I looked over the edge of the bed; Elle was asleep. Her face was spectral in the white spill of light. The shadows cut contours around her features, discs of blackness cupped her eyes, pyramids of blackness framed her nose, a black dab crowned her bottom lip. I tossed my pillow on her. She protested, turned away, her face now profiled, a pale plane. I stepped out from my covers and onto her mattress, over her form, which was hooded in folds of down, and into the hallway. In the dark I found the thermostat and turned up the heat. Then I went back to my room, stepped over Elle once more, and slipped beneath my covers. We didn't have much time. It was the morning of the first state choral competition of the year. The competition took place at a university two and a half hours north of town, and the best large and small ensemble of every county would be present. Our school would represent our county in both divisions. We'd travel by tour bus with the Quarter Tones; they'd compete in the small ensemble division, while my choir would compete in large ensemble.

Elle had been allowed to stay over on a weeknight because she was saving my mom an early trip to school. Still, I heard the muted tone of my mom's alarm, her early stirrings in the kitchen, her slippers shushing on the tile, the coffee pot roaring; I heard the rustling of her newspaper, she flicked it open to bow the crease, and then folded it again to turn off the whistling kettle. She drank tea every morning, and made the pot of coffee just for me. She'd

started the toaster: I heard the springs compress. The low din of the morning newscast. Outside, the chestnut-backed chickadees repeating their name in the apple tree. *Chicka-dee-dee-dee*. I could see my mother at the kitchen window, watching the birds as they dropped from bough to feeder, retrieved a sunflower seed, and retreated to the bough again to crack it open.

Elle was still sleeping, her face turned in profile, the white plane of it. Now I took an edge of her comforter and whipped it back, breaking the seal of flannel. I imagined the shock of opportunistic cold, its hands invasive, palming her skin. She didn't react. She froze, her sharp knees stabbed into her chest and her hands curled around her heart. She whimpered.

"You're boring," I said. I covered her back up. Feeling my mother working inside me, I added, "We have to leave in a half hour."

I slipped out of bed once more, stepped over her, and turned on the series of recessed lights that were installed above my closet. I began to pull sleeves from the chamber, comparing fabrics against one another. I fanned out empty arms. The overhead lights beamed downward judiciously, as if each lifeless item were under interrogation. I compared the vibrant blue incorporated into the print on a jumper to the vibrant blue of a turtleneck. They matched.

Every night I wore the same oversized cotton tee. I looked over to where Elle lay; she slept. I pulled the shirt over my head. I faced the mirror. The soft light, the morning shadows. I never liked to see my full reflection for long. My figure felt alien when I observed it as a whole, the uninterrupted transition from legs to hips, from hips to torso and on. I was only attractive when I was partially obscured. My legs in a screen of nylon, my breasts under the management of a bra. In aggregate, it seemed all wrong. Now I rotated to absorb the dim cast of the recessed lights. No, my body had not changed. My aquiline nose still split my face like a mountain range.

My plain brown eyes, too close, quite small. My shoulders, rounded forward, my chest soft, and my soft stomach. But I noticed now — perhaps it was the soft light — that my body seemed to have lines. Not straight ones, but lines nonetheless. I rolled my shoulders back and observed myself obliquely. I tried to see myself as beautiful, as a unit.

“You having a standoff?”

On impulse, I gathered my body in my arms, hugging my breasts with one hand, my hips with the other. I looked down on Elle. My embarrassment was eclipsed by annoyance. I crouched, retrieved the pillow I’d thrown before, and dropped it on her face.

The hallway was dark when we stepped into it. My mom only lit the room she occupied, in order to conserve energy. Beneath her bedroom door, there was a faint slice of light. I heard the current of the showerhead. As she moved in the stream, the water slapped against tile in irregular volumes, a deluge when she wrung the moisture from her long hair, when it ran down her forearms. She’d left two travel mugs on the dresser at the top of the stairs, and two twin breakfast sandwiches, folded in tin foil. We took them and descended. We were both dressed carefully. I wore the jumper; she wore a ribbed dress, which clung ruthlessly to her outline. As we took each downward step I thought we moved like debutantes. We glided to the front door and out of it, into the ripening morning, palms on the cold handles of the Jetta. We opened the doors and closed them, settling into the seats as if we were destined for a real place. I imagined us driving to our campus and past it, and continuing on, driving all day. Elle started the engine. We let it idle in the driveway, waiting for the heater core to wake. Elle took the bag from her pocket, pulled it open with the nail of her index finger, and separated a pinch from the bud. She

situated it in the spout of our foil pipe. Then she passed it to me, along with a half-ounce lighter, light blue and slim as a pinky.

We drove slowly to campus. When it was her hit, I held the steering wheel and kept us moving between the lines while she lit the pipe. As we made the corner onto campus, we rolled down the windows to let the bad, hot air out of the Jetta. The tour bus was in front of the gym's entrance with its parking lights on. We parked in the neighboring lot.

"I made a kit for us," Elle said.

She opened the glove compartment. I half expected to see the stack of letters that she once kept there, written by India. But now she pulled out a bottle of Victoria's Secret *Love Spell*. It was pale lavender in hue.

"Close your eyes," she directed.

She sprayed the scent over my head, so that it showered down upon me. The car smelled overripe, fruit on the turn of rot, I thought of the scent of fermenting apples in Elle's front yard from that fall.

"Now open," Elle said.

I opened. Elle made a hook of her hand, and widened my eye — her thumb beneath my bottom lashes, her forefinger under my brow. I flinched when the cold liquid eye drops hit my pupil and spread. One more drop, and then the same in my other eye. She repeated this action in her own eyes without flinching. Then she produced a tin of breath mints, passed one to me, and put one on her own tongue. White coin on pink slab. With her tongue out like that, she looked like a child. Her lips slack and pink around it, her tongue pink and wide; maybe it wasn't so

much like a child. The small white coin. She slowly withdrew her tongue back into her mouth, closed her eyes.

We pulled down our visors and opened our mirrors. The square of light, my white face. I made eye contact with myself. My face seemed distant.

“You don’t look high,” Elle said.

I looked at her. Her eyes seemed thick. High gloss, gray.

“You don’t either,” I said.

Ms. Kox was waiting on the top step of the bus. She wore a pale gray suit. The jacket was unbuttoned; the shirt beneath was starched and pastel blue. Her shoulders cut straight and even like a man’s, and she wore flat black loafers on her feet. I looked up at her from the pavement just in front of the bus door. Strange looking up to her, such a small woman; I noticed she’d cut her thin hair short. It barely reached her ears now, and her feathered bangs lay flat against her forehead. She looked like a young soldier. She held her clipboard against her stomach, and stared into our eyes. Then she tilted the clipboard back to make a mark on the paper.

“I like your haircut, Ms. Kox,” I said.

“People always take a conductor more seriously if she appears to be a man from behind,” Ms. Kox said. She handed Elle the clipboard and turned around, mimed four-four time with her hands. Then she turned back to face us. “Do I pull it off?”

“Quite well,” Elle said.

“Hey,” Ms. Kox said, leveling her gaze with Elle’s. “Watch it.”

Then she laughed, took her clipboard from Elle, and stepped back against the divider behind which the bus driver sat, to let us pass. I crept by her. As I walked down the bus aisle, I

couldn't meet the gaze of any girl I passed — my joints felt out of place, I kept rolling my shoulders back and cranking my head from side to side in an attempt to get comfortable in my body. I found a pair of empty seats. The seats on the tour buses were upholstered in 80s fabric and placed in pairs, with armrests and tray tables like an airplane.

I took the window seat, and Elle sat beside me. To sit down was a relief. Here, we were alone. We turned on our reading lamps, and in the early darkness of the bus interior, they beamed down on us. Outside the field of light, the darkness intensified, an effect of the exclusive brilliance of the bulbs. Like being onstage, we could only see one another; we knew the audience was there, but they were invisible to us. We turned in toward each other furtively, co-conspirators, and began to laugh. Our secret did seem big, then, though it seems stupid now.

Elle plugged headphones into her phone. She took the left ear bud, I took the right one, and we pushed our seats back to recline. Within moments, we were asleep. I didn't wake until we were ten minutes out from our destination. The sun was up and blinking through the wide tinted windows, the dried rain spots catching and redistributing the light. Elle had, in her sleep, slumped against my shoulder. Her mouth was parted. Her earbud had fallen. The overhead lamps were still on; they bore down into the daylight willfully, arbitrarily. What had once been a private room now synthesized into the surrounding space.

26.

We filed off of the bus, all of us foggy and stiff from napping in the upholstered seats, and emerged into the sunlight. It was a mild day, and we stood with our faces turned to the sky.

We each had a water bottle and a black binder full of music. Ms. Kox swept the bus aisle. Then she descended the three steps of the bus, taking each step heavily, and landed heavily before us. Right foot, left foot: she stood squared, her feet shoulder-width apart. She dropped her leather satchel of sheet music onto the pavement. It, too, landed heavily. The bus door folded closed behind her like a statement. It clapped, she hugged her clipboard to her chest. We stood around her like a football team at half time. On either side of our group, other choirs passed in lines, coursing around our shape. Other students with music folders tucked beneath their arms, who held water bottles from their caps, and whose movement had purpose, as if they, too, expected to win.

Each choir was assigned a classroom at the university in which they could prepare before their allotted performance time. As we walked down the hallways, I listened to the other choirs warming up. The sound ebbed and surged both with our proximity — we neared the sound, passed, and then left it behind — and with the rising and falling pitches. The higher frequencies came through more audibly, those lower frequencies were barely a murmur, and the whole scale weakened as we walked away from it. Then we approached another classroom, and again the scales would come within earshot, would brighten in tone, would intensify in volume from our closeness, and then would fade as we passed.

We found our own classroom. It was full of plastic chairs, already placed into rows for rehearsal. Ms. Kox warmed us up, and then told us to sit.

“Before it’s your turn to sing,” she said, “you will sit in the auditorium and listen to the preceding choirs. It will make you nervous, because you’ll be hearing every district’s best choir.”

Ms. Kox put her palm on the music stand before her. She pressed down upon it, and it lowered to reveal her torso. She scanned the choir, starting in the soprano section, sweeping to the altos.

“But you are our district’s best,” she said. “And when you get on the stage, you’re just going to do what you do every time you sing together. You’re going to listen.”

At that, she ran our choir through the first few bars of our three performance songs, and then ran the Quarter Tones through the first few bars of theirs. Then we walked in silence down the hallway and entered the dark auditorium. There were two rows that were marked with a piece of paper on which our school’s name was written. We sat and watched as the other schools performed. I knew most of the songs that I heard.

When we were on deck, Ms. Kox led us out into the aisle, and we waited at the flank of the stage. We stood with sopranos in the front, altos in the back, so that we would already be in the correct performance order. Then we walked on stage, arranging ourselves in two wide arcs, with Ms. Kox at the center. For a moment the brightness of the stage lights felt too hot on my face, and the music, when Ms. Kox asked for it, felt as though it were very far away. As I inhaled, the breath was the empty breath meant only to support speech, there was no music in my breath. There was no depth in my sternum. But as we began — for, inevitably, the breath gave way to song — I recognized the vibration between my temples. I softened my knees. I was sober. The room shot into focus, the notes keyed in, and I began to listen.

After our set had concluded, we returned to our seats to listen to the Quarter Tones. Their first song was a contemporary composition written by a Finnish woman named Mia Makaroff. It was commissioned for an a cappella ensemble from Helsinki, a six-voice group called Rajaton.



In the Quarter Tones, a twelve-person ensemble, every voice part was doubled. The song was entitled *Butterfly*, and was written in 6/8 time. It began on a complex chord, which sat beneath a fermata. The voices entered together but the note seemed pulled out of thin air, its inception was imperceptible. It was suspended in a divine pianissimo, in which every note was articulated in balance and in tune. The sopranos compensated for the higher frequency of their note by singing even more quietly than the rest of the group. I could have listened to that profound control forever. I almost dreaded the inevitable crescendo.

I watched Ms. Kox. At first I could not see her hands: they must have been gathered at her sternum, cupped together as if they held a winged insect, a butterfly. I watched as they expanded outward, and with them, the sound swelled; at the peak of the chord's vibrancy, she allowed the cluster of notes to ring only for a passing moment, and then began to bring the sound back inward. It dissolved in the same manner in which it appeared. Ms. Kox cued their breath; I could see their diaphragms pop outward. Then the baritones set the rhythm on two percussive eighth notes vocalized on consonants: "dn." With that, the piece took flight, sopranos and baritones on the downbeat, mezzos and altos creating a syncopated rhythm on the vocalization "fa tum," lingering on the *f* and the *m*. I'd heard Ms. Kox explain this line as the beating of a butterfly's wings. The mezzos barely hit the quarter note "tum" before the altos picked up their sixteenth note "fa," like a doubling of wings battling gravity, gathering upward momentum. *Fa tum, fa tum; fa tum, fa tum*. The sopranos had the expressive line, the first two measures of which were all crisp sixteenth notes. The doubled voices were so well matched that I couldn't discern one vocalist from their partner. The basses were silent, in wait — soon, the altos took over the expressive line, and the basses and baritones took up the butterfly's wings. Every voice part

traded. The tenors carried the melody over the measure into the next musical theme, and then all voice parts found a common chord once more, harrowing in its depth.

I watched Ms. Kox's hands carving the 6/8 time. Her right hand ticked subtly: downbeat, two beats to both the left and the right, and then a sweeping upbeat to bring us to a fresh measure of time. Her left hand showed feeling. With it, she interpreted dynamics, she drew air toward her as if she were trying to catch a scent. Her hand was an edge, her hand was a throughline to her heart. In my experience, the most truly powerful conductors were men. They strongarmed the air, they wrestled with it. Their moments of sensitivity and delicacy were doubly profound, because they came from a man. The breadth of a man's back, the strength and confidence of his movement. For a male conductor, the space before him is unmistakably his. But Ms. Kox's conducting was not an ownership of the space around her, but a collaboration with it. She didn't corral music. She opened channels through which it naturally flowed. I studied her motion, and began to follow it with my own hand, upon my leg. Downbeat, two beats to the left, two to the right, upbeat.

The performance was scientific. It was mathematical. They sang complex chords that were built on a root of dissonance. Notes that wanted to shove away from one another, which, in any other habitat, would repulse one another. The singers steadied that charged space between two magnets. It was music that lived within that charge. And as I listened, I knew that no matter what, I needed to win entrance to that group, to be one of those twelve voices.

Our school won both the large group and small group divisions. As we made our way back to our tour bus, it no longer felt like the other choirs were coursing around us purposefully.

They didn't carry their water bottles like us, or hold their music folders like we did. Because though they, too, had expected to win, they — unlike us — had not.

27.

We waited until the sun set, just in case. To kill time, we did what we always did — we sang in the Jetta on the way to the bank, where I pulled twenties out of the ATM. We each got an americano and doctored it with cream, cinnamon, and simple syrup. Once those were gone, we bought a 24-ounce Tahitian Sunrise to share. Light ice. We went to Elle's house, and I did our math homework while she surfed afternoon television specials. She stopped on my favorite tabloid talk show, and my eyes flickered up from our work. Then she switched the channel to a sitcom with a laugh track.

Once we were quite sure that we wouldn't be recognized, we drove across town to Ruby Heights. I gave Elle the code. She punched it in. I watched the iron gate as it opened away from us, groaning as it did. The main road in the development made a loop. They had their own system of streetlamps, different from the town's. Thick trunks, black gloss coating, with round, old-fashioned globes. Though many driveways opened onto that main road, there were also courts, cul-de-sacs, and avenues that branched off, creating a web, so that every strip of land was put to use. The recreational building was on this main loop. There was a four-car parking lot beside it. We pulled in. The only car.

The rec building kept with the community code. It was painted moss-green with white trim and a dark roof. The grass was short and bright. It was the only one-level construction in the

development, as far as I could tell. Inside, there was a sauna, two tanning beds, and a small gym. The gym area featured a weight room and a set of cardio machines that faced a wall-length mirror. Between the machines and the mirror, there was an expanse of floor space that was lined with blue mats. Keala's parents bought their house in Ruby Heights before most of the constructions had even been completed. Their neighbors were still plywood shapes on dirt lots, the main road didn't make a full loop — it ended abruptly, opening to the bald hillside. For her whole life, Keala had lived in Ruby Heights. She'd never been to the rec building. She wouldn't start now. And someone should use the amenities offered. They were just sitting there.

Elle put a hand on the arm of one of the ellipticals and it slid forward, away from her.

"How does this work? Is it an arm thing or a leg thing?"

"Mostly legs, I think."

Neither of us had brought a pair of shoes that were suitable for the gym. We were wearing flip-flops. We slid them off, left them against the wall, and got on the ellipticals. The ridged surface of the foot paddles massaged the soles of my feet as I sank from side to side. I set my palms against the swinging arms and inclined my body forward. Elle watched me for the motion. She began to imitate me. First she bent one knee, letting the platform pop up beneath the relief of weight. Then she bent the other.

"So," I said, "arms *and* legs, but definitely more legs."

I experimented for a few strides, and watched her stilted movement, too vertical.

"Not like that. Don't just bend. You have to press, I think, through the front of your foot,"

I said. "Like this, let your heel come up, then push down."

"Like running, but slow motion," she said. "Stupid."

I reached over her machine and turned up her resistance. She stepped off her left platform, standing exclusively on the right, and let the paddle sink, then stepped both feet on the left, transferring her weight. I ignored her and set to work on the elliptical, performing the movements correctly. I felt my quadriceps firing, and liked the feeling. The feeling of change, I thought.

Elle sank into synchrony with me. We watched ourselves skate in the mirror. Set on the same track, we arced to the left, arced to the right. My expression was serious, I was impressed by the intensity of my gaze, reflected in the mirror. I marched like a slow-moving soldier. Elle began to pedal backwards.

“I want to stretch,” she said.

She stood two feet on one platform, facing away from the mirror, and it sank down like a circus elephant to its knees. She stepped off and came to stand before the mirror. Then she crossed her legs and sat. I joined her, and we both stretched our legs out into a wide V. I had never been very flexible, I let my knees buckle up as I reached forward.

“Smile,” Elle said. She held her phone in one hand, and pointed the camera at the mirror. She propped her elbow on my shoulder, leaned into my side. I renewed my effort, straightened my knee, pulled forward to grab my big toe. Stress shot up the back of my leg. We took a few more photos, and then we decided to tan — the real reason we had come.

There were two tanning rooms, but we both went into one, so that we could be together even as we tanned. It was a small room with rough blue carpeting. There were two wicker baskets; one basket was for fresh towels, and the other for used towels. The basket for used

towels was empty. On a wooden end table, there was a dish, which was full of protective eyewear.

I went first. The bed was already open, the inner surfaces were concave and faced in glass. When closed, the top and bottom created a futuristic tube, open at the head and feet. There was a plastic pillow on one end, shaped like those used on massage tables. A sign on the wall asked that patrons disinfect the bed and pillow after use. I stripped and sat down, tucking my legs in and pulling down the top of the bed as quickly as possible, so that I would be concealed. I put on the protective eyewear. It was blue and insectlike, two almond-shaped caps that were connected with a thin strip over the bridge of my nose. I turned the machine on, and saw my reflection in the glass above me as I waited for the heat. The bulbs that lined the bed ran vertically. They woke slowly, violet. Then the fans kicked in, and the warmth bloomed under my calves, my butt, my shoulders — those places where my body pressed more densely into the glass.

Elle sat down and leaned against the warm case. I could see the back of her head, her fine black hair, through the thin strip of space between the lid and base of the bed. I watched as she dropped her head back to rest on the top, extending her neck. She began to sing, upward. We had been working on writing a song together. We only had the lyrics for one verse and the chorus. She sang the melody line, slow and bluesy. I sang harmony, but an upper harmony, clean and ethereal. My voice resonated strangely in the tanning bed. It got caught in the fans and sounded digitized. It hit the glass above and resonated back at me, as if someone were singing down upon me, in my own voice. Elle's was muted, overtaken by the sounds of my enclosure. It almost felt as though I were singing alone, and the strange disembodiment of the high harmony began to

take over in my mind as the melody line — unpredictable, peculiar, refreshing. Improved, I thought, by its estrangement. When my twenty minutes were up, the machine clicked off automatically, and the bulbs seemed to go cold at once. I could feel the imprint of sweat that I had made upon the glass, the pool of it beneath my back. I opened the lid, reluctantly. My skin was tight and hot against my frame. It also smelled strange, warm and earthen, a bacterial heat. My contacts were pasted to the surface of my eyes. I dried myself, wiped down the bed, and then stood with the towel wrapped around my body.

Elle began to undress. First she unzipped her hoodie, and pulled it off, allowing the arms to retract into themselves and turn inside out.

“Ryan texted me just now,” she said. She nudged her phone toward me with the edge of her foot, it was open on the carpet.

I picked it up, and read the message he’d sent. *Where have you been? Let’s meet up this weekend.*

“Are you going to?”

“Not alone.”

I closed her flip phone, put it on the table beside the protective eyewear. Now she was inching off her jeans.

“It doesn’t sound like an open invite.”

“Read the next text from him.”

“Stop,” I said. “He wants you to go alone.” I crouched down beside my pile of clothes and began to sort through them.

“If you read the next text, he invited us both to a thing at his friend’s house.”

I looked over my shoulder at her. She was naked now. When my eyes fell upon her, she did not fold or hide. She stood just as she had been standing before, before I'd looked. Her body made me angry. I thought she was too bold, standing like that, in the full expression of her stature, her narrow hips, their subtle curve. It's not that I'd never seen her naked before. I had. But there was some play of power in our staging: me, wrapped in a rough white towel, crouching like an animal on the floor; her, standing over me, more confident than I'd ever be, even in her most vulnerable form. In fact she seemed stronger for her nakedness.

She smiled and bent into the bed. Her body was a straight line on the glass. She pulled the top down, and the machine began to hum. I dressed and then sat beside the bed. I leaned against the enclosure, as she had, feeling her closeness, feeling her eyes on the back of my head.

28.

My mom shoved her steering wheel hard to one side in order to wedge the tires against the curb. We were a few blocks away from the waterfront, on a steep side alley. I slipped on my shoes. My feet were warm from the drive, an hour with their bare soles pressed up in the back corner of the footwell, against the vent. I looked at Keala, who'd been reading silently in the backseat for most of the drive. She was scanning the page urgently, her eyes flashing across and back. She made a point not to return my gaze, and traced each line of writing with her pointer finger. She was close to the end of a chapter. When she finished it, she fit her bookmark into the seam of her novel, closed it, and tucked it into her bag with her music folder.



It was dusk. There was a rind of orange on the horizon line, and silhouettes of ships tipped on the black water. When the three of us reached the shore, the wind rushed up off the Sound to meet us. It had a bite. Cold and marine, a textured wind, which seemed not to creep along my bare legs but to tear up them. Keala and I wore our concert dresses, long black synthetic gowns, and matching character shoes with a round toe and a one-inch heel. The heavy skirt of my dress wrapped around my thighs, whipping and churning ominously behind me. Over the top we wore ski jackets for warmth. The chill would be more intense on deck than it was here on shore. Out there with the black sea salt roughing my cheeks, grating my calves. My mom was guarded. She wore a long parka, a stocking cap and a wide scarf. There was just a slot uncovered; her bare eyes and the ridge of her nose — we shared the same ridged nose — were all that showed.

There was only one boat hitched to the main dock, a 94-foot passenger ship built in the late eighties. It was constructed from steel and operated by the premium excursion and sightseeing outfit in the area. A section of the dock, which opened to the ship's gangway, was cordoned off with stanchions and red velour rope. Paying passengers were already forming a line in the chute. They weren't allowed onboard until fifteen minutes before departure. The boat itself was painted white with a royal blue stripe and broad tinted windows. It was three-tiered: the main deck was fully enclosed, the second level partially enclosed with an open-air bow foredeck, and the third deck open. Every line of the boat was strung in white Christmast lights, and each individual window was traced in them. A string of round bulbs ran from the bow, over the bridge, over the open-air deck, and back to the funnel. A grand lit star was suspended over the stern. The effect was blinding. The light of the boat was reflected in the water, which rose up to

the ship's face in distorted white ripples. At the very edge, where water met hull, it seemed that the boat was floating in a pool of illumination.

At the end of the gangway, a man dressed in a Santa Claus costume stood beside a lifebuoy. He was leaning on a post, blocking the waiting passengers from boarding. We approached him, and he widened his stance territorially.

"We're with the choir," my mom said. She presented our tickets.

The man thumbed his wide belt and nodded. With a step to the side, he presented to us the gangway, his hand wide, open-palmed and white-gloved, the inside of his sleeve a bright red sateen, the white fur of his suit weighing upon his wrist, and the heavy crimson velvet draped along the arm in folds. The three of us walked up the metal ramp and onto the boat.

Other choristers had already arrived. The group was gathered at the front of the main deck. Dr. Dave stood with his back to us, adjusting a microphone. The microphones were arranged in an arc. There were four of them, set back from our performance area so they'd pick up our collective sound rather than individual voices. My mom found a seat with some other parents, and Keala and I joined the singers. Our numbers were limited: only the oldest section of Dr. Dave's choir was allowed to participate in the Christmas Cruise performance. There wasn't enough space on board for the full group. It was a privilege assumed with age. Directly across from us, the bartender prepared his workstation. The service area was two-faced and bisected the main deck. The wood bar top was bookended in poinsettias, and a garland of fake pine was pinned along the edge, each uptick fixed with a red bow. Between us and the bar, there was patron seating, benches lined up like church pews.

A keyboard had been set up stage right, and Dr. Eliza sat on the folding bench, tinkering with settings. She laid out a chord; it sounded digital. She adjusted the settings, and then played another. Eventually she found a more traditional concert piano sound: tinny, but inconspicuous.

“Let’s begin warming up,” she said. “The latecomers can join in as they arrive.”

She played a starting chord and nodded to us. We stepped around one another and fell into two lines, mirroring the arc of the microphones. Given my height, I was stuck in the back row. We made windows of the shoulders before us. My view was blocked by a soprano in the front. I tapped her on the shoulder, and without turning around, she stepped responsively in the direction I’d indicated. I positioned my body toward Dr. Eliza.

*“The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue,”* she began. She didn’t sing, exactly; her voice lilted. She called this her Julia Child voice. She held her right hand up beside her mouth, and created a cave of her palm, to indicate the lift of our soft palates. Then she let the hand fall along her cheek, to indicate the length of our vowels.

*“The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue; the lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue; the tip of the tongue; the tip of the tongue; the tip of the tip of the tip of the tongue,”* we chanted.

“And faster,” she said. She set a tempo on the keyboard.

We repeated the litany again, and another time. Each time we said it faster, until each *t* and *p* began to resemble the other, and our rushing tongues began to fail us. She cut us off, and played a major C chord.

“Disappearing *sol*,” she said.

For this, we brought our fists to our abdomens. Then we began to recite the solfege scale. *Do, do-re-do, do-re-mi-re-do*. When we reached *sol*, we left it out, replacing the note with a beat

of silence. It was a practice in hearing music in your head without singing it aloud. Younger vocalists sometimes had to hum the designated note until they learned to hold it in their own body. In this, the most advanced faction of Dr. Dave's choir, made of girls who had been training with him and Dr. Eliza for years, we were able to maintain perfect silence on the subtracted note. This was a crucial skill to learn: how to carry a note inside your head, so that you could pick it up the moment you needed it, and not before.

"Jennifer," she said. She cut us off. "You are much too loud in the speakers. The microphone is picking up your voice. Switch places with another soprano or manage your volume."

Jennifer nodded. Dr. Eliza directed us with a tilt of her hand to sit down. We crossed at the ankle and sat where we were, our dresses pooling around our knees and creating a black sea of fabric. Each individual chorister seemed to rise from the same fabric. Then Dr. Eliza produced a few large paper sacks from the corner of the boat. She stood before us and called out each name. When a chorister heard her name, she stood, obtained her preordered boxed dinner, and then sat again. Afterward, Dr. Eliza handed down an envelope of drink tickets, of which we were both allowed two. We took our tickets and passed the envelope on to the next girl.

"There will be two performances. We disembark from this dock at 6:30. The first show will occur an hour later," Dr. Eliza said, "and we will perform again at 8:15. At this second destination, there will be a bonfire on the beach, and our performance will be broadcast to the people there as well. Please abstain from eating your dinner until after our first performance. Also abstain from any sugary drinks until after our first performance — better yet, altogether. Questions?"

“Are we allowed to walk around?”

“You may walk around the boat before and between our two performances, but if you are late to return, we will not wait for you. You won’t be included in the performance.”

“How will we know what time to be back?”

“If you cannot be trusted to return in time, then don’t leave.”

As Dr. Eliza completed this sentence, passengers began to board. They stepped on and looked around, their faces caught in the white glow of Christmas lights. Enamored with the spirit of the ship, they boarded carefully, quietly, as if their presence might disturb the illusion. Soon we were lost in the crowd of passengers. I could make out my fellow performers from their somber blacks; I watched them as they shifted through the mass. Keala found me, and with our drink tickets, we slipped to the front of the line at the bar. I ordered a hot chocolate. Keala was scandalized — we were meant to avoid sugary drinks, she reminded me — and then ordered one herself. We put on our ski jackets and then walked upstairs and onto the open deck. Above us, the sky was traced in stars, and the string of Christmas lights ran through.

We leaned into the railing. The air was salted. I felt it raze my cheeks. My hair tore back behind me, twining into ropes. In the wake of our ship, there was a fleet of smaller boats, also dressed in Christmas lights. Christmas music was being projected loudly from our ship, for the benefit of our passengers and the followers. The water was dabbed in reflected luminescence, and the glow of the surrounding ships seemed to continue for miles — perhaps that was the glow of onshore lights. Illuminated also were the grand seaside homes, imposing in their stature and implications. The greatest embodiment of wealth in my personal life was Keala. Her gated development, the private recreation building. I assumed that she was rich. In the face of these

estates, I wasn't sure what she was. For that matter, what I was. Between us, the silence that was once born of comfort was now full of questions left unasked.

After our first performance, the passengers on the ship erupted into applause. Beyond the closeness of the audience, I heard the following ships; they sounded their horns. And through the windows I saw them flash their lights at us. They ticked on and off, rocked side to side, miles of these flashing lights, doubled on the water's face.

29.

The first flakes hit the windshield, melted in wet asterisks and latticed outward. We rarely saw snow. In our temperate climate, winters were mild, with heavy rainfall. The first flakes hit, spread, and dissolved. They left behind a pointillist mutation of the scene beyond the car. Everything was gathered in these ellipses of water, pins that held an entire reflection. We were watching Rich. He moved about the living room, before the front window of the house. The living room was well-lit. In the dark early evening, the window was like a plasma screen. We followed him as if he were an actor in a film. We watched as he picked up dishes, moved away from the window. He came back into view, talking on the phone. He sat on the blue waffle pique couch, his back to us, leaned against the armrest and propped his head on his hand.

Now the snow had some infrastructure, and upon the ice filigree it began to build. The windshield became a sheet of tissue. Beyond it only lights and colors, forms and shapes were

visible. We watched as our field of vision molded over. The Jetta was off. The engine was ticking, cooling. Warm air leaked from the seams of the car. It was getting cold.

Because the snow had thickened, we could no longer track Rich's movements. We didn't see him leave the house, approach the car. We didn't see him stand before the windshield. We didn't see him until we saw his knuckles brush against the glass, his hands grasp the wipers. He pulled them to stand. We both started at his unexpected closeness. Elle tucked our new glass pipe beneath a paper Jack-in-the-Box sack on the center console. He came around and opened the driver's door, ducked his head in, and looked from me to her.

"Keeps them from freezing to the glass," he said. He gestured to the windshield wipers. "Makes it easier to scrape in the morning."

"Thanks," Elle said.

"Why are you two sitting out here? Why don't you come in?"

"We were watching the snow," Elle said. She stared out the windshield, the membrane of white.

"Riveting," Rich said.

He looked at me suspiciously. Rich always looked at me suspiciously; he sensed I struggled to keep secrets from figures of authority. He waited for me to crack. I shifted in the passenger seat of the Jetta. I straightened my legs, pushing aside fast food packaging and empty cups, which cluttered the footwell. I wondered what he saw, what he perceived, looking in at our habitat. The car smelled stale. It was a composite smell: the smell of old grease, wet-bottomed paper bags; of overworn clothing, heaped in the backseat, each layer trapping layers beneath, hot,

sour, musty; the smell of Elle's shoes, the insteps black from the pressure of her bare soles, sharp, acrid; and then the skunky undercurrent of the glass pipe and its contents.

"Well," Rich said. "If you get bored." He nodded toward the house, ducked out into the snow, and closed the car door behind him. We heard his footsteps on the crust of snow as it compressed beneath his boots.

Elle threw the door open.

"Dad," she yelled. I heard Rich stop. "Can you order pizza?"

He must have nodded, I couldn't see. With the seal of the door broken, and our private moment interrupted, the spell was broken too. The embroidery of ice, the crushing quiet of this whitewash, the bright privacy screen of accumulation. Now the snow that covered the windshield just looked like white matter. We both got out of the car. Rich had left the door open, expecting us to follow him. Inside it was warm, and Rich had turned on the television. He was kneeling before the liquor cabinet. The kitchen lights were off, so where he crouched, he was cast in shadow. He turned toward us.

"Drink of choice?"

Again, he looked to me for an answer. I could feel Elle's eyes, too. I was caught in a crossfire.

"I don't really have one," I said.

He laughed. When he stood, he stood with a fifth of Captain Morgan. Elle's face was illegible, but I saw her tilt toward him, toward the rum and the kitchen island. He took out three glasses and a liter of coke. For Elle and I, he made up two rum and cokes with no ice. He stirred each drink with a teaspoon, and then clinked the spoon on the edge of a glass. He put the spoon



in his mouth and sucked the liquor off its dish while he poured a couple fingers of rum for himself. Then he slid our drinks to the edge of the island. We were drawn to them almost instinctively; before I decided to enter the kitchenette, my hand was already clasping the glass, lifting it up. The light caught in the syrup, winked at me. It promised a difference in feeling.

What liquor had come to represent for me was not rebellion or maturity, but ease. The loosening of my need for control, freedom not from authority but from my own mind. A respite from analysis. When we drank it seemed simpler to just allow my life to happen. My impulse to redirect, to correct course, became distant. I only remembered it later. When that impulse did resurface, parading in the form of hindsight, I was able to laugh it off. To laugh, for the first time, at myself. Rich lifted his own drink, the liquid more translucent in its purity, the hue caramel. We all tapped our glasses together in the middle.

“Only because you’re staying here, where I can see you,” he said.

We drank. In the background, a laugh track rolled on the television. I was grateful for the noise, the television’s indiscriminate murmur, a sound outside our shared liquid swallow. We finished our first drinks standing up. Rich took our empty glasses and mixed us each a second. As he stirred the drinks with the same teaspoon that he’d used before, and put it in his mouth once more, there was a knock on the aluminum door. At the sound, my breath hitched. I felt my pulse in every extremity — I saw before me the inexplicable nature of my surroundings. My best friend’s father, his shirt taut across his chest, tucked into his Carhartts. His fawn-colored hair, feathered and licking the back of his neck. His glass two fingers full, my glass, his daughter’s glass. The shadow of the kitchen. The edge of the spoon against his bottom lip. The laugh track.

Of course, it was only the delivery man, to whom we owed no explanations. His visit was transactional. After passing the kid a fold of cash, Rich brought the box into the kitchen. He flipped on the light switch and opened the lid.

“Thanks, Rich,” I said.

“I’ll just take a few slices and leave you two,” he said. He slid three plates from a cabinet and placed them beside the open box. Then, leveling one of them just beside the cardboard, he pulled up three slices. The skin of cheese stretched and snapped. He situated the slices on his plate. Luminous orange oil sat in craters on the surface of the pizza, in the dips of the pepperoni. Rich brought his hand up to his mouth, his fingers glossy with grease. One at a time, he cleaned the grease from his fingertips. He took up his plate in one hand, and in the other, his cup of rum. He went to his room. A moment later we heard the door shove closed.

“Finally,” Elle said. She tilted her glass back and drained it. Then she raised her brows at me, tipped her chin down, indicating that I should follow suit. I did.

“Well, cool of him to share with us,” I said.

“It’s not like we don’t know where he keeps it.”

“Isn’t it better that we didn’t have to sneak around?”

She knelt down and took out the Captain Morgan once more.

“No,” she said. She refilled our cups and replaced the bottle.

Scotty and Ryan would pick us up in an hour. We needed to be ready, we needed to be buzzed. Warm, too: we were walking. We’d agreed on an intersection half a mile down the road from Elle’s house. They would meet us there in Ryan’s truck and take us to their friend’s house,

not far away. The Jetta would remain in the driveway. That way, if Rich checked, he wouldn't know we'd gone out. If he called, we were on a walk.

We carried the drinks to the bathroom. Elle plugged in her straightener, and while it warmed, we applied makeup. I took my foundation from my hairline down my neck, shaped my cheekbones with a broad synthetic brush. Liquid eyeliner, the absolute line of it, the deathlike crown of mascaraed eyelashes. Elle could get her hair electrically straight, so it shot down her back like a sheet of steel. Mine, when straightened, hung limp, silk. It followed the curve of my shoulders and draped over my breasts like a cloak. The more I pressed it with the flat iron, the more silken it became. Slack and conservative, soft orthodox hair, no tension, no edge.

With the door we were especially careful. The aluminum had a tendency to crash, sometimes to pop like the shell of a can, and so we eased it shut on its springs. I depressed the button before fitting the door into its frame, and then released the button so that the metal tongue secured it in place silently. Then with the steps, we were careful. If we slipped, he would hear. We descended them, one hand on the railing, and then stepped onto the driveway. We passed the Jetta, coming down on the fresh snow with vertical precision, in order to minimize the swish, the shush of the crusted snow. Soon we were in the street, and there were no tracks. No tracks from cars, pedestrians, or animals; ours were the first.

We walked upon a bright earth. The light from the moon was absorbed and reflected in the snow, the light from the snow was reflected once more upon the white of our faces. As we walked our faces were illuminated. We crossed the street into the woods, which was lit like day. The trees were dense along the road, and then became sparse, and we entered a clearing. The compressed silence of snow-covered woods. Through the trees, I could see the lights from the

house, far enough now that we could laugh at our fear. A second day unpeeled. It was that bright. Today, in the clearing. We tripped over logs that were concealed by snowfall. The shell of an old truck, its back dense with snow, and its rusted flanks exposed. The car doors were mutilated by bullet holes. Its bumper sat detached in the snow, the empty cavity cupped upward expectantly. A paper target was stapled to a pine tree. I stepped forward and a can crunched beneath my foot. Elle, behind me, tripped hard and caught herself with her hands. When she stood, she stood with blood on her palms. She looked at her hands with wide eyes, and then up at me, and burst into laughter. I helped her clean them. We squatted down, and I collected a handful of clean snow — I saw the shards of a broken bottle where she'd fallen. She closed her eyes and held her hands before herself, as if she were waiting for a surprise. I filled them with snow. I pressed the snow deep into the cup of her palms. Then I took each of her hands in one of mine and pulled them apart, allowing a chasm between them, through which the snow funneled and fell, the bottom layer reddened.

29.

Like most teenage girls, many of my behaviors could be traced back to a consumptive desire for affirmation. I had learned that there were ways that I could make affirmation happen for me. If I offered my attention and praise to someone else, they often felt bound to reciprocate. We entered into a contract of care. The love that we wished to direct at ourselves, we learned

instead to direct at one another, counting on that other person to reflect it back at us. I gave compulsively, always hoping to see a shimmer of that energy returned.

But I was just now learning that with men, it was somehow different. The terms of the agreement were distorted. The values were not interchangeable. Though the rule held — if I paid attention to a man, he paid attention to me — the exchange rates were off. It seemed that the attention I received was also on his terms, also about his affirmation. In essence the attention that I received from men was for and about men.

We followed behind Ryan and Scotty. The hall was dark and empty, and though the music was loud, I heard no voices. It seemed to take ages for us to reach the living room. Ryan and Scotty walked very slowly, and took up a lot of room, blocking our view as if to postpone the reveal. The ceilings were low, popcorn and yellowed, so the whole place felt close and dank. The living space was open-format. To the left, there was a dining room table with mismatched chairs. The surface of the table was patterned in a matte film of dried spills, and that area of the house was unlit. At the far end of the area, the kitchen opened. It was lit with fluorescent overhead bars. The tile was white and patterned in dried swirls of mud. The cabinets were faux wood, and four handles of liquor were lined up on the counter top. Two of them appeared to be unopened. And to our right, the tile gave way to beige carpeting, ratted with hair, crumbs, lint, flaked with dried mud. This was the living space, here there were three couches, and they were all situated around the focal point, a television screen.

The ingredients for a party were there — loud music, lots of alcohol — but there were only three other people in the house. All of them were boys, and all sat on one sofa, watching a football game with the sound muted. They sat slouched, with their knees wide and their hoods

up. I only recognized one of them: Carl. A teammate of Ryan and Scotty's, whom we'd met at the party on the hill.

I noticed then that between the kitchen area and the living room, right beside the seam of tile and carpet, there was a stripper pole running the height of the room, secured with metal plates to the floor and the ceiling. Once I'd seen it, it was the only component of the house that I could see, and every step I took seemed in relation to that pole.

Elle and I entered the room and sat together on one of the sofas. Beside Carl sat his older brother, who rented the house, and a roommate. They tipped their chins up at us, a greeting, and Carl stood.

"Screwdriver or vodka-soda?"

"Out of soda," his brother said from the couch, without looking away from the television.

"Screwdriver, then," Carl said.

He went to the kitchen, knocked around, and then returned a moment later holding two large mugs by their handles in one fist. In the other hand, he held a book. He passed down the mugs, which we took. Orange pulp floated on the surface, but the liquid was almost clear. Then he threw the book into Elle's lap. *Stripping for Dummies*. He grinned at us. The two on the couch were watching now, the trace of a smile on their lips, their eyes flat and bored.

"You think I need a book for this?" Elle asked.

"Show us what you got, then."

Elle rolled her eyes up to Carl without lifting her brows, so her expression disclosed contempt. I studied her face. She was different, I thought to myself, in that she felt no obligation to deliver, to affirm. She was good for me in this way. The impulses that I had adhered to for my

whole life were thrown into question with Elle. Perhaps the reality was that she understood men better than I did, understood transactions with men, and that often, in dealing with them, you were never actually receiving anything in return. Instead, it was a one-way enterprise. You give, they receive. They give, they receive.

Carl looked at me. Was I always regarded second to her — or did I only notice when this was the case? His features were spaced out across the wide expanse of his face, and his eyes, far from each other, seemed almost to cross in order to focus upon me, before him. They were trimmed in pale eyelashes, nearly white. I felt my whole body in the beads of his eyes, and wondered, with heat, what he saw when he looked at me. I could feel my body where it sank into the padding of the sofa, I felt the pin of a tufted cushion, I felt the spread of my thighs and the widening of my ass, the slouch of my shoulders, the weight of my breasts and the pinch of the wire, which fit them in place, the gap of space between the slope of my chest and the expectant cup of my bra. I felt my stomach where the skin tucked, pouched — I told myself it was skin, just skin, skin is elastic and it folds — and then inside I also felt my gut. I registered an effervescence there. It was elation: I was elated to be seen. So, these were the terms of our exchange. In his eyes I was evaluated, and in return, I was given the excitement of empty anticipation.

I picked up the book; Carl continued to watch me. I flipped through a few pages, and then tossed it into Scotty's lap. He was sitting to my right. I drained my drink in one long pull. I had to get away from what I was feeling. That my body only existed to be assessed. And that any assessment would do. Because all I was to receive out of the transaction was the satisfaction of being seen. The ceiling, too close. The drained yellow of the light here, the wrung faces of the

boys around us, the immovable line of the pole. Had a woman ever agreed to dance on that pole? Scotty's hand was on my thigh. His fingers down the inner seam. I looked at him. I'd lost some of my buzz on the way here, and I could tell he was sober, too. I remembered the haze of my first drunkenness, the last time I'd seen him.

"Sorry," he said, quietly. "That was creepy."

He withdrew his hand, but not completely. That burden, the urge to apologize, as if I were responsible for Scotty's enjoyment, as if I needed to reassure him that this was a party, that he was doing a good job. His hand, still present, but hesitant.

"No," I said, not believing it myself. "You're fine."

He smiled, and let his hand become heavy on my leg. Beneath it my skin pricked.

We were a few drinks deep, and had not moved from the couch, when my phone began to buzz. I lifted my hips in order to pull it out of my back pocket. I checked the display screen.

*Rich.*

Elle looked over my shoulder, and I tilted the phone so that she could read her father's name.

"Let it go to voicemail."

She stood, still holding her mug in one hand, and walked to the sliding glass door beside the dining table. She flipped the latch, slid it open, and a current of cold air infiltrated the space. She walked out, and left the door open for me to join her. I left Scotty, his hand slid down my thigh as I stood. I felt him watching me as I left the room. I felt my hips in my jeans, the stiffness of my arm, my hand clutching the mug of vodka and orange juice. I slid the door closed behind me. My skin was covered in goosebumps; I'd left my coat inside. Rich was calling again.



“I think I dropped my phone in the woods,” Elle said. She was checking her pockets, but she didn’t seem concerned. “Don’t worry about him. Just ignore him.”

“I can’t ignore his calls,” I said.

“Why not? I can.”

“What if he calls my mom? Or reports us missing, or something?”

“Whatever. Answer.”

I knew that this was code: she didn’t want me to answer the call. But I did.

“Hey Rich,” I said. I tried to stabilize my voice. “We’re just walking in the snow. Elle forgot her phone.”

“Put Elle on.”

I handed the phone to her. She rolled her eyes and brought it to her face — keeping a few inches between the speaker and her ear.

“Hi, dad,” she said.

I heard the low frequency of Rich’s voice, he spoke quickly. Elle didn’t say anything for a few minutes, and then answered only to promise we’d be home soon. She flipped my phone shut and handed it back to me.

“He followed our footsteps and found where they met with tire tracks and disappeared,” she said. She laughed. “He says he thought we were abducted.”

I thought of our footprints. One origin, one direction. I wondered if they were straight or erratic. I imagined the logs upon which we tripped. The red snow in the clearing.

By the time Ryan and Scotty got us home, Rich appeared to have gone back to bed. I woke the next morning when he opened Elle's door and looked in at us. I pretended not to have seen him. After a few moments, he shut the door and left.

We didn't get out of bed until hours later. Rich had left for work. We toasted two frozen waffles and ate them with a pat of butter each and cold Aunt Jemima. In the sink were our plates from last night, dried over in dark marinara and plastic threads of mozzarella. On top of these, we stacked our breakfast plates. I rinsed them in a stream of water. Then we went back to the woods to look for Elle's phone.

The road had not been plowed, but tires had run rivers through the sun-warmed snow. In the pit of the tracks, the pavement was black as oil. The scene was different in this light. This real new day. When we arrived at the clearing, the trees no longer seemed pert and stable beneath the fresh snow. They were drooping, burdened, used. Everything dripped. The branches, the tirewells of the rusted truck. Snow slid from the cabin roof. In pockets it had melted all the way through, and you could see the decomposing leaves beneath.

I called her phone. It rang until it went to voicemail. I called again and we stalked the ground, stepping quietly, listening. Again, it went to voicemail. This went on for several minutes. At last we found it, in the shadow of a log. Its display screen lit up beneath a thin film of snow.

We entered the performance space through the back. There was an unmarked door, painted matte black. It had no external handle or knob. When shut, it was flush with the wall. You had to know it to find it. On performance days, the stagehands propped it open for the musicians with a wedge of scrap wood. Upon opening the door, you were deposited into the gut of a grand hall. A vast black-walled storage area, high-ceilinged, with a garage door that was always shut. The space was used for constructing and holding set pieces. Inside were intricately cut silhouettes, plywood cityscapes, industrial fog machines. The room was dimly lit by distant recessed lights, way up there, small as stars in the black ceiling.

From here, it was hard to know exactly how great a theater you'd infiltrated. You couldn't see the stage that this space backed. The stage: a wide black floor, scuffed and spike-marked with gaffer's tape. The high moonlike lights, and the recessed slot of spots, rigged up to a fly system and controlled by an unseen technician. The 3,912-pipe tracker organ. Its case was made of salvaged old growth douglas fir, and elaborate basswood carvings dripped down the pipes' faces like wedding veils. The stage, a window into the world of our performance, some universe in which seventy-five girls stood singing, perfectly still from the neck down, focused on the hands of one man.

In the audience, there were three tiers of folding chairs, ascending, and two tiers of opera boxes, 800 seats total. The theater's walls swelled subtly inward. We were together, performers and audience, within a womb of music; convex surfaces are optimal for diffusing sound. Down the pale concrete aisles, to the far end of the theater, stood two double-doors. They were painted black, manned during performances by university students in black slacks and black shirts. And past them the lobby, which spilled out in polished concrete. The building's face featured

wall-to-wall glass doors, and above those glass doors a swath of glass windows, and stacking up, a row of glass skylights. In the space between glass and concrete, an immense Chihuly ran its fingers through the air. It was positioned just below the skylights, so the light was filtered through the brightly-hued blown glass, and from some angles, colored the reflective concrete below.

We did not enter through those glass doors, their faces at once a mirror, a window, and an access point. Ours was the back door. An opaque and covert portal, meant for those who belong on stage, whose place is looking out. We had access to the university's concert hall two times a year, for our biannual formal concerts: one just before Christmas, and one in the late spring. On the day of the concert, our call time was early in the morning. The double-doors did not open to the audience until early evening. For the hours in between, choir members weren't allowed to leave the backstage area. We were required to stay together. It was about establishing a mentality. We had rituals that were particular to us, our own language; we saw only those who existed within this shared consciousness.

But most of that time was actually free. Free within our confines. Assiduous rehearsal was pointless on the day of a show. On stage, it was all left to muscle memory. No matter your good intentions, you will always revert to your worst performance. That's why our rehearsal was militaristic and reiterative. We were not practicing, we were training. We were building a foundation on which we could depend. The hours preceding a concert were just about getting in the right headspace. We needed a carefully monitored space, which would activate our muscle memory. An atmosphere that consisted exclusively of these people, these ideas, these ways of being. Eradication of the outside world.

Most of the day, we lounged together in a sound-proofed rehearsal space and killed time. We drifted together and apart. Some sat on the ground and did their homework, using the seat of a chair as a desk. Small groups gathered to play hand games and card games. Pairs sat with their backs against a padded wall and shared earbuds. And over the course of the day, in different combinations, we congregated in massage circles. Each girl sat cross-legged and kneaded the shoulders of the girl before her.

Our only real responsibility was to have our hair French braided by one of the volunteer mothers before showtime. There were six or ten of them. They set up braiding stations in the back of the room. They each had one chair for their subject, one chair for their supplies. On their supplies chair, they kept hairspray, elastic bands, and bobby pins of every natural hue — of course, we weren't allowed to dye our hair unnatural colors. Each braider had her own style. Some were known for severity and ruthlessness, but produced organized plaits. Others were soft and generous braiders but produced a loose weave, haloed in wisps of stray hair. The best had kind and accurate fingers. They neither braided too quickly nor too slowly, too violently nor too passively. You felt safe in their chairs. You could relax, enjoy the dull, sure carve of their long nails upon your scalp. But you weren't allowed to wait around for the best braiders. The rule was that you had to offer your head to the first hands available.

The directors brought in three full-length mirrors and set them up lengthwise along one wall. We sat before the mirrors to do our makeup. I remember, when I was a younger chorister, watching the older girls as they applied powder, lipstick, and mascara. They brought their noses very close to the mirror, and contoured their cheeks so that their expressions would appear dramatic in the stage lighting. The older girls always managed to get a braider to give them two

braids instead of one. I wanted two, like them, but I was always afraid to ask the woman who was doing my hair. I knew it would slow her down; it would take her twice as long. I always kept quiet. I let them fix it in one braid. Why did mine seem to rise up, to make my head long, to accentuate my cheeks? And there were always thin locks of hair loose at my temples, staticking out eccentrically. But now I was an older girl. I was not afraid to demand two braids, and to baptize myself in finishing spray. The little girls watched me where I sat before the mirror. They watched my controlled application of makeup. They tried to mimic me.

For this concert, Dr. Dave hired the university's organist. We were to wait in the wings while he played through three arrangements of *In Dulci Jubilo*, and then, as a full choir, we would enter and sing together Porterfield's arrangement of Vivaldi's *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. I was not nervous; in a choir I was never nervous. Our performances were finished products. They were scientific. We had been experimenting with ingredients and chemistry for months. It was almost as if the concert itself was simply a presentation of our findings. I can't remember a performance for which we weren't ready.

No, I was never nervous. It was a different feeling altogether.

We entered from stage right. We waited in the wings, already in order. The first to file on were those who stood on the top riser, starting with the altos. They stepped up the first riser, the second, the third; they walked to the end of the step. The mezzos followed, and then the sopranos; I stood in the top row, two from the right edge. The middle row then filed on, all of this to disembodied applause, for due to the brilliance of the stage lights, we were blinded outside of our own spotlighted universe, the world of our stage, the seventy-five individual components of our being. The stage we could see, but our audience was a vast and deep vacuum,

potent with presence, but indiscernible. The girls on the final riser filed on, followed by the littlest girls, who stood flat on the stage. Some of them could not read words, but had already learned the language of music. For them the applause swelled. A pause in movement. We stood still, listening to the hollow drum of clapping hands. Then, Dr. Dave entered. He walked with purpose, his arms swinging, and then stepped up to his platform, where his music stand bore his folder, open in anticipation to the first song which he'd conduct — the Vivaldi.

It wasn't nerves. I felt both buoyant and rooted, as if a beam shot through me, I united both sky and earth. I could feel my face, the lights upon it, but could not feel my feet. I knew that they were a shoulder-width's distance apart, but I couldn't sense the seam of foot and riser. My expression was soft and serene, but I felt very grave, I felt serious. Here I was not myself alone, I was a part of a mechanism. We moved and thought as one. It was a potent way to be, and I felt superior for it. We were one organism, and our only function was to share music. Each song was produced in our distinct style and technique. Our approximation of the score was well-wrought, deeply studied, and mindfully fostered. I was a component of this body of music. It was only this, the consummation of our work, the piercing perfect beam, the music hanging in the air around me and within me. The only time this song would happen, the first time, the last time. I felt imbued with life. This seemed to me the only true expression of mystery. Time moved slowly, or not at all. Time was suspended to contain music. My bound hair pulled my scalp back, my eyes open. The intense heat of the stage lights. All three tiers of the theater full, and the pipe organ blowing profoundly behind us. The velvet poinsettias on either side of the stage. The deep emptiness of a full audience.

Toward the end of our set, at every Christmas concert, we sang Schubert's *Ave Maria* arranged for three parts. As long as the choir had been in existence, this had been tradition. Every girl that had ever been in the choir, had gone through the training and graduated — she remembered *Ave Maria*. Those alumni often attended our concerts. They were chasing that feeling, the purity of being a girl in a girls choir with a concert to perform, a message to deliver. They attended because being there, and identifying as one of us, made them feel as if they were part of something big again. It reminded them of a time before they learned they were ultimately alone. For *Ave Maria*, all alumni were invited on stage to sing beside us. Their hair loose, their clothing casual. They punctuated the lines of black uniformity with color and individuality. But the muscle memory held. We sounded as one voice.

31.

Not long ago, I was revisited by a song. I had not heard it in over a decade. My mother and I were talking on the phone, and she had a drawer out with my old programs and recordings from those years. There was a trace of that glad heartache in her voice — when someone is transported to an earlier time, and with that time travel comes a fusion of fondness and longing. You want to preserve the memories untouched, in the past, where they belong. But you also wish you could return to them, bring them to life once more, in a palpable, solid sense. You wish you could walk those streets, be bathed once more in that quality of light, feel the way that you felt then.



She told me that she missed that era, even listening to the same tracks ad infinitum and taxiing me back and forth to rehearsals, always in the dark, always in the rain. The competitions, the concerts. Did I remember the French braids, how I used to squirm? I never let her braid my hair, though she was a pretty good braider. I always demanded some other mother. Yes, I remembered. And the dresses we had to wear in the early years of the girls choir? Did I remember those ugly things? I asked her to remind me. They were green, with a wide white-piped sailor's collar. Oh, how we'd protested. Finally when I graduated from the intermediate group, they swapped them out for the long, black gowns. An image of that green dress rose up in my mind's eye, began to sharpen ... the sleeves stopped at the elbow, a thick-fabricked white mock shirt was sewn between the wide sailor's lapels. It had a drop waist, which pulled the dress down in straight lines; whatever shape my body had was concealed. The dress itself didn't have any special meaning to me, but the image of that dress created a spark in my memory. That spark opened to a flame of sensation. Just remembering it, remembering my body within that dress, returned me to a past form of myself. I was suddenly overwhelmed with shame, with potential. The world seemed made of sharp points that I couldn't resist.

After we'd gotten off the phone, she sent me a photograph of myself in the green dress, taken after a performance. It was just as I'd remembered. In the picture, my hair was done in one braid. It was true, then; my hair did seem to rise up in that braid and elongate my head. My cheeks did seem prominent. I hadn't had my braces yet, and my smile was meek. I tried to keep my crooked teeth concealed behind my lips. I asked my mother to send along a few images of those old programs as well. She sent me a sampling from over the years, both from the girls choir and from high school. As they came in, I pinched the screen of my phone to better read the text. I

felt nothing looking at the titles and the composers; none of it was familiar to me. So I began to look them up.

The names were meaningless on their own, but just two bars of a recording, and I was transported. I felt my seat on the edge of a church pew, the businesslike distribution of new sheet music, take one and pass the rest down, a ghost of my own thumbs depressing the metal clamps on my three-ring binder so the clips would snap open, the satisfaction of slipping a new piece of music into place. I remembered it all not as a rush of images but as the *feeling* that every small, intentional action gave me, a feeling of one thing leading to the next, first the sheet music and then the singing, a feeling of belonging, of purpose. The stained glass in the church, when we rehearsed with the overhead lights off and only the natural glow coming in diagonally, leaving the side aisles dark and the pews blanched white by the sun.

I made my way through the compositions. Every melody had been stored somewhere in my mind; I still had them all memorized, and most of the lyrics, too. I felt affection for every one of them, even for the songs that I'd hated at the time. For those that I'd hated, I was sentimental about my old indignant disgust, my opinion of my refined taste. Underneath the joy of realizing every song that I learned then had retained its place in my memory, I felt a nostalgia for the person I was when I sang them, the person I thought I would become, for my life and future as I imagined it then.

Among the selection of programs my mother sent, there was one from a joint concert that had taken place during my first year of high school, the year of my story.

It was late January, and a renowned touring choir from Russia was passing through our district. Our school was to host the foreigners and put on a show with them. As I read the set list

on the old program, I remembered how absurd the concert had seemed during our preparations. Though our small northwestern town was not diverse, and there were very few students of color in our school, Ms. Kox made us learn a number of spirituals and gospels. We needed to come across as distinctly American, we were ambassadors of American culture. But we were a choir of predominantly middle-class white students, attempting to represent the wide-ranging diversity of America, despite our homogenous appearance. It seemed painfully obvious to me then, and still feels that way to me today. What I remember from that concert is not the music we sang, but the music the Russian choir brought to us.

This is not simply because the Russians truly owned their music, though they did; they owned it and sounded as if they owned it. It was more complicated than encountering authenticity, recognizing and admiring it.

It centered around one song. The Russians opened their set with it. It was called Reveille, and was written by one of Russia's most beloved modern composers, Georgy Sviridov. Sviridov was born in 1915, composed in the Soviet era, and died in 1998. His melodies were inspired by Russian Orthodox chants, and the lyrics were often taken from Romantic-era Russian poets. This number was the seventh in a ten-song cycle, the lyrics from all ten songs were written by the poet Pushkin, who was one of Russia's most beloved writers. Both Pushkin and Sviridov were profoundly influential in Russian culture, but their work remains relatively unknown to the Western world. Pushkin's poetry is considered nearly impossible to translate. Most of the writing he produced that met global acclaim only did so after being turned into operas.

Reveille, which was composed by Sviridov in 1978, utilizes the text from a poem written nearly a century and a half earlier by Pushkin. The verse reads:

Zorya is being beaten ... from my hands  
Old Dante falls out  
On the lips of a verse just begun  
What is unfinished subsides,  
And the spirit flies away.  
A familiar sound, a living sound  
How often have you heard it  
Where it developed quietly  
I have long been.

In Slavic mythology, Zorya is the goddess of dawn and dusk. She's sometimes represented as two goddesses: the Morning Star and Evening Star. She opens the gates for the sun to cross the sky in the morning, and at night, she guides the sun home and closes the gates. *Zorju bjut ... zorju bjut ...* everything depends upon her. She brings the sun across the sky.

Perhaps it is a love song to the course of a day, or the sunrise and sunset of a life. A reconciliation of the end of one's life and the dawn of immortality. It is hard for me to read the poem as something belonging to anyone other than Sviridov, because I cannot extricate it from the music, and the way he illustrated that poem musically. In performing the composition, the choir embodied Sviridov, Sviridov embodied Pushkin, Pushkin embodied Dante. There is a center, something unchanging, something that persists. This is what I heard on that day, in the darkened auditorium. Reincarnation, eternal life, cycles, in an unending score.

*A familiar sound, a living sound.*

“To me Pushkin sounds as the realization of the high predestination of man. Each epoch interprets him in its own way. Averse to idealizing the Pushkin era, I do not want to give him a modern interpretation either. I simply try to follow him into his unattainable heights as best I can,” Sviridov wrote.

I’m not sure how it was for the other students in my choir. But for me, it could have been any choir, from any country. Perhaps it could have been any composition. I don’t know how much particularity matters. I was primed at that moment for something to wrench open my small world. When I listen to Reveille now, I hear in the recording a very faint noise on the track, a static in the sound quality. Like wind through leaves or a light and constant rainfall. An old rub, an archaic interference. I remember when I first heard it.

We’d had an uncommonly cold week, the temperatures had dropped and the rain had turned to freezing. But our climate never stayed there long, and that week was no different — indeed it was the last cold snap of the season. Spring began for us in late January with the recurrence of the hellebore, the lenten rose, its soft princess pinks, the petals velveteen and heavy. They had a tendency to droop and sag over their frothy chartreuse pistils. The hellebore, innocent, pink-bodied, white-tipped, wide-pedaled, at once innocent and evocative. At the end of that cold week, the temperatures leveled in the sixties, the sun came out, the rain was steady. The hellebore bloomed. Next would be the crocuses. In February, the snowdrops, and in March the wild Indian plum trees would bloom.

Our cold, the Russians said, was nothing — in Moscow, temperatures stayed below freezing until late March, there was snow on the ground, they didn’t get their first blooms until

that time. Fitting, too, that a snowdrop should be the first flower, rising amongst the melting ice. They showed us photographs of their city, a real, hard-faced city, with bright spires and domes, brick squares, laundry flagging from open windows in apartment buildings. Their conductor was a petite older man, with wiry gray hair that reached his shoulders in waves. His mouth was always downturned, it was wide and heavily jowled, but he wore a kind expression and had handsome clear blue eyes. His way of interacting with others was very intimate. Sometimes he patted both cheeks with his hands, or took one's shoulders in his palms and squeezed affectionately, as if just being around another person overwhelmed him with tenderness.

He had an authoritative presence before his choir, his career spanned decades and he was well-regarded by all of his pupils. Today he wore an ill-fitting blue pinstripe suit, wrinkled from travel and hanging loosely from his frame. The choir was co-ed, there were two rows of women and two rows of men. They watched him for their cue. Our hired accompanist sat with her hands in her lap; the song must be a capella. She also watched him. He produced a pitch pipe, blew a note, and then slid it back into his trouser pocket. Then he lifted his hands before himself, in a wide and open gesture, his inner arm shining upward and the tip of his thumb and pointer finger lightly connected, the other fingers fanned out. I barely saw him tap down upon the air, but he must have, because the chorus entered.

The first chord was a spacious, open chord, vocalized on a close-lipped hum. It was built of interior reflections, all eight voice parts shared the three notes of an F# minor chord. The volume and resonance they produced was impressive, with only the closed-off cavity of their mouths, the light vibration of their lips.

The chord then swooned sadly, collapsing downward into a flood of minor dissonance. From there it underwent a transformation. It was like watching first light enter a room, as the light itself both changes in intensity, and its source, the sun, travels along a thread, passing behind obstacles, jumping tree boughs. The music moved in that same way, the way daylight blossoms into a room, soaks the surfaces, warms, subsides, brightens — holds — and then decays. Then the notes washed downward, returning to the progression's original simplicity.

From there, the entire sequence began again. I imagined clouds floating across the sky, covering and uncovering the sun. It was the cycle of a day, and just as one day ended, the next began.

Here, the soprano soloist entered. Her line is written to mimic the peal of a trumpet — a reveille, an awakening — and represents the birth of a day. She is Zorya, Aurora, dawn. She is the first singer to open her mouth. She sings a line on *tra-ta-ta*. The line, for the entirety of the song, never changes. It only alternates between two notes. Even as the chord beneath her darkens and distills, her call is unchanging.

I will never forget the emergence of that Russian soprano's voice. It seemed to surface from some rift in time. It was not projected: it was carried upward as if on a wisp of smoke. I had never heard this particular arrangement of notes and rhythms before, and yet as soon as I did hear it, I began to long for it, even before it was over I was longing for it. The sensation that her voice came not from a body but from eternity itself, coaxed forth out of chronology, kept me for a moment from searching for the source ... but what kind of body could contain this purity? The two rows of women were perfectly uniform, they wore tea-length silk dresses, the color of dark pink tulips. The hue was lurid in its intensity, like some vital organ. A pale pink frill trimmed the

collar and covered the bust. Over the dresses they wore angular white cardigans. Finally I landed upon her: she stood in the back row. She was the same as all of them, but there she was, somehow different in that she'd been chosen. I found her only because her face lengthened *tra-ta-ta* while the rest of the choir sang through closed lips. She was their dawn, she was Zorya. She brought the awakening and opened the door of the sky.

The low swirl of the chorus in eight parts churned like a prehistoric storm, and with Sviridov I sat in its eye. The sound was not thin and homogenous, like ours seemed. Every voice rang out in an individual brilliance, it was seismic ... a ringing, sad, a deep sound, alive and dead at once. *A familiar sound, a living sound.*

Yes, Sviridov, in his composition, somehow was able to take exactly what Pushkin wrote in 1829 — a familiar sound, a living sound — and reproduce it in song.

What did it arouse in me?

That day, sitting in my school auditorium. It felt as if someone was communicating to me from over years.

And then the bass soloist began. Behind the two rows of female choristers stood the two rows of men. Each wore a black tuxedo and a thin bow tie. The soloist stood stage left, on the very end of the bass section, in the far back. His face was red with effort, and his whole body seemed to vibrate with its message. His voice emerged from history, as if summoned from the past — more like a cosmic rip through the Heavens than a mortal voice. To me it sounded like the sun shearing through clouds. The bass solo is made up chiefly of duplets, so it had the quality of an expressive chant. He was long in limb and torso, and had a long face, sharply featured, serious, but with a kind crease in his eyes. We later learned he was a father, though he wasn't yet



twenty. All of these young people seemed much older than us, much more worldly, people for whom sadness had a real weight and meaning. Perhaps it was the song — but no, I didn't imagine we were capable of singing such a song.

Then a downpour; for the first time, the chorus broke their seal, and took advantage of the open vowel, *molto espressivo*, very expressively. The soprano solo was augmented by the full power of the soprano section, and then in the thirty-eighth measure, they all suddenly cut away, leaving the single soloist to continue her refrain. Dawn once more, because dawn always comes again. The bass soloist echoed ... *Zorju bjut ... Zorju bjut ...* The return to simplicity was like cool air the morning after a storm, the sound of completion. But in the final moments, there came a response: an alto soloist sang a variation on the soprano line, mutated. It sounded as though someone else had arrived just a moment too late, and found an empty room, but could feel the presence of someone who was just there, or who was there many years ago. A dust-curtained, gray room. With this, the song ended. Some new variation, carried forward into the empty cycle of the day, of life.

I have often wondered if Sviridov, in ending this way, was suggesting the inevitability of our aloneness.

Such an awakening has few peers: there's sexual awakening, spiritual awakening. It was all tied up within me — music, sex, and God — so that an awakening in one sense carried over into all the others. I believed that I finally understood music, that I had found God, and that I was in love. The differences were lost on me.

The rest of the Russian choir's set passed in a slur of vowels and digraphs, and following the concert we all migrated to the cafeteria for a reception. It was upon entering the cafeteria that

I realized how many people had attended the concert. Ms. Kox had advertised widely in the community and the surrounding neighborhoods. In solidarity, every Russian living in our general area came to the concert.

These local Russian audience members stuck around for the reception in order to trade some words with the touring choir. That's when we met Ilya and Alexey. Though the Russian choir was leaving the following day, Ilya and Alexey lived here. We met them by a table of traditional American horderves. There were pigs in a blanket, deviled eggs, potato chips. Before we left, we traded numbers, and agreed to meet that weekend.

I wanted to go along with the touring choir. I wanted to figure out what exactly I'd just heard, a discourse through generations, which seemed to have traveled across time to communicate to me. My train of thought was exactly this — if the Russian choir could make me feel so expansive, maybe these Russian boys could continue the outward motion, maybe they would teach me something else I didn't know, really I just wanted to learn, I was ready to get my education anywhere.